YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARSHAT BESHALACH**

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In loving memory of

Yitzchak and Sheva Shayndel Schwartz *z"l*

whose *yahrzeit* is 13 Shevat

by Avi and Sarah Schwartz

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**The Subjugation of the World to Torah and Those Who Study It**

**Introduction**

The commentary of the *Or Ha-Chaim* has enjoyed a place of honor in the Chasidic world. The Baal Shem Tov himself had a special appreciation of Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar; it is related that the Besht even testified that the latter learned his words from the mouth of God Himself. The comment we will study this week is one of those that sheds light on the reason for this special connection between Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar of Salé, Morocco, and the Besht and his successors.

**I. "It is I who stipulated with it" – What stipulation?**

The Torah describes the return of the Sea of Suf to its natural state as follows:

And the sea returned to its strength [*le-eitano*] when the morning appeared. (*Shemot* 14:27)

The Midrash understands the term "its strength," *eitano*, as alluding to a "stipulation," *tenai*, that God had set up with the sea at the time of creation:

Rabbi Elazar Ha-Kappar said: Moshe said to Him: Didn’t You say that the sea would not be rendered dry land? As it is stated: "I placed the sand as the boundary of the sea" (*Yirmeyahu* 5:22), and it is written: "He shut the sea with doors" (*Iyov* 38:8). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You did not read from the beginning of the Torah. What is written? "God said: Let the waters be gathered" (*Bereishit* 1:9). **It is I who stipulated with it, so, I stipulated with it from the beginning that I would split it**, as it is stated: "The sea returned to its power [*le-eitano*] before the morning" (*Shemot* 14:27) – to its stipulation [*tena’o*] that I stipulated with it from the beginning. Immediately, Moshe heeded the Holy One, blessed be He, and went to split the sea.

When he went to split the sea, it was unwilling to take upon itself to split. The sea said to him: I should split because of you? I am greater than you, as I was created on the third [day of creation] and you were created on the sixth. When Moshe heard this, he went and said to the Holy One, blessed be He: The sea refuses to split. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He placed His right hand on the right hand of Moshe, as it is stated: "He caused [His glorious arm] to go to the right of Moshe…" (*Yeshayahu* 63:12). Immediately, it [the sea] saw the Holy One, blessed be He, and fled, as it is stated: "The sea saw and fled" (*Tehillim* 114:3). What did it see? It saw that the Holy One, blessed be He, placed His right hand upon Moshe. It could no longer resist, so it fled immediately. Moshe said to it: Why are you fleeing? It said to him: From the God of Yaakov, due to fear of the Holy One, blessed be He. Immediately, when Moshe raised his hand over the sea, it split. (*Shemot Rabba* 21, 6)

What is the essence of this stipulation that God made with the sea? Further, what is the meaning of the argument between Moshe and the sea, and how does Moshe's right hand finally convince the sea to part?

This *midrash* was taken in two completely different directions by two leading authorities. The Rambam, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*,brings this *midrash* in order to establish his view that there is nothing new under the sun, and that from the time of the creation of the world, there has been nothing new in nature:

On the contrary, the universe since continues its regular course. This is my opinion; this should be our belief… The miracles are to some extent also natural: for they say, when God created the Universe with its present physical properties, He made it part of these properties, that they should produce certain miracles at certain times, and the sign of a prophet consisted in the fact that God told him to declare when a certain thing will take place, but the thing itself was effected according to the fixed laws of nature. If this is really the meaning of the passage referred to, it testifies to the greatness of the author, and shows that he held it to be impossible that there should be a change in the laws of nature, or a change in the will of God [as regards the physical properties of things] once they have been established. *He therefore assumes, e.g., that God gave the waters the property of joining together, and of flowing in a downward direction, and of separating only at the time when the Egyptians were drowned, and only in a particular place.*

I have already pointed out to you the source of this passage, and it only tends to oppose the hypothesis of a new creation. It is said there: Rabbi Yonatan said: God made a stipulation with the sea that it should split before the Israelites; thus it is said: "And the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared" (*Shemot* 14:27). Rabbi Yirmeyahu ben Elazar said: Not only with the sea, but with all that has been created in the six days of creation [a stipulation was made]: this is referred to in the words: "I, even my hands have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded" (*Yeshayahu* 45:12); i.e., I have commanded the sea to split, the fire not to hurt Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya, the lions not to harm Daniel, and the fish to spit out Yona. The same is the case with the rest of the miracles. (*Guide for the Perplexed* II, 29)

According to the Rambam, none of the visible miracles that were performed for the righteous constituted a change in the laws of nature; rather, they were embedded in nature from the six days of creation.

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, however,takes the *midrash* in a completely different direction. First of all, he rejects the possibility that the stipulation here is a specific and unique stipulation for the people who left Egypt, for two reasons:

We must try to understand the nature of this stipulation: If it was made for the people who left Egypt, why was the sea agitated at that time? As they said that it protested against Moshe, and said to him: I will not split for you, for I was created on the third day and you were created on the sixth day… until God placed His right hand on the right hand of Moshe, as it is written: "He caused [His glorious arm] to go to the right of Moshe" (*Yeshayahu* 63:12).

I further see that it would split for outstanding people against its will, as in the incident brought in *Chullin* (7a) involving Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. And if God stipulated with the sea only regarding those who left Egypt, by what power did Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair overcome the work of creation? (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 14:27)

Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair had an experience very similar to what is related in the *midrash* about the splitting of the sea in the time of Moshe:

Once, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was on his way to redeem captives, and came to the river Ginnai. He said to it: O Ginnai, split your waters, that I may pass through you. It replied: You are on your way to do the will of your Maker; I, too, am doing the will of my Maker. You may or may not accomplish your purpose; I am sure of accomplishing mine. He said to it: If you will not split yourself, I will decree that no waters ever pass through you. It, thereupon, split itself for him. (*Chullin* 7a)

Here too, the water "submits" to the righteous individual. If we are talking about a stipulation unique to the Sea of Suf and the people of Israel, why did Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair merit this?

Therefore, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that the stipulation here includes much more:

Rather, this stipulation is among the set of stipulations that God made with the entire work of creation, to be subjugated to the Torah and those who toil in its study, and to do whatever they decree upon them, and that their rule over them shall be like the rule of the Creator. Therefore, you find regarding the heaven and the earth, and the stars, the sun, and the moon, that righteous people, individuals and all the more so collectives, controlled them, as God decreed about them at the time of the creation. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* strongly disagrees with the Rambam: according to him, God stipulated with the entire work of creation that it would be subjugated to the Torah and to those who study it. Those who toil in Torah study can therefore change nature, and thus their rule over creation is similar to that of God. All the changes in nature brought about by our righteous leaders, which the Rambam explained as having been embedded in creation, are actually, according to the *Or Ha-Chaim,* changes in creation effected by the power of the righteous who study the Torah!

**II. "He looked into the Torah and created the world"**

How does Torah study give the righteous the power to change the world? The *Or Ha-Chaim* alludes to this in his commentary to our *parasha*:

This is the esoteric dimension of the verse: "[But now thus says the Lord] that created you, O Yaakov" (*Yeshayahu* 43:1), about which *Chazal* said (*Vayikra Rabba* 36) that the Holy One, blessed be He, said to His world: Who created you, who formed you, if not Israel? And all by the power of the Torah. Go out and learn what I wrote on the verse, "In the beginning" (*Bereishit* 1:1). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

In his commentary to *Parashat Bereishit*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* delves more deeply and expands further:

"*Bereishit*" is also explained by way of the verse: "Then I [Torah] was by Him, as a nursling" (*Mishlei* 8:30), about which *Chazal* expounded (*Bereishit Rabba* 1, 1): Read not *amon* ("nursling"), but *uman* ("artisan"). This is exactly what the verse is hinting at in the beginning of God's word, informing us about the creation of the world – making known through what He created it – and He said that He created it with the Torah, since it is the artisan… And according to this, the level of its "masters" is magnified, since they merit everything; and therefore it is right for them that they are called "builders," which this is what *Chazal* said (*Shabbat* 114a), that Torah scholars are called builders – because what is in their mouths and hearts, that is the builder. And this is what is stated (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25): "If not for My covenant… the laws of heaven and earth I would not have set." (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bereishit* 1:1)

The *Zohar* states that the God "looked into the Torah and created the world" (*Zohar Teruma* II, 161, 1). The world was formed through the Torah. Based on this, the *Or Ha-Chaim* understands that those who master Torah merit to be masters of the world as well. Therefore, they are called *bonim*, "builders," because they rule the power with which the world was created.[[1]](#footnote-1) If the Torah is that which sustains the world, then one who toils in the study of the Torah and controls it can control creation as well.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* uses this principle to explain some of the halakhic principles in the laws of forbidden foods:

I have written here only an outline of the subject, to help you understand the verse: "Your Torah is in my innermost parts" (*Tehillim* 40:9) – for every food a person eats, the foundation of the nourishment in it derives from its having absorbed sanctity, i.e., Torah. From the time Adam sinned [by eating from the tree of knowledge] and mixed up good and bad, every food contains a negative element [along with its beneficial aspects]. Therefore, God commanded us not to eat from the fruit of a tree which is less than four years old, and therefore wheat is surrounded by husks, straw, and other parts which have to be discarded. God has instructed us [through the Torah] to abstain from numerous foods in which the harmful elements are overpowering, so that the life-force of the chosen people will not become contaminated. Therefore, when one eats food that is permitted, it is as if he benefited directly from the light of Torah, the light of the celestial regions, except that this light underwent a metamorphosis in accordance with the needs of the physical universe, whose creatures require physical food, each in accordance with his specific needs. This is the meaning of: "Your Torah is in my innermost parts"; his [the psalmist’s] desire to carry out God's will was strengthened by his not having any of the bad within him, that would remove the desire for what it good for the soul. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 18:2)

If indeed all of reality was created from the Torah, then when a person eats certain foods, he is actually eating the Torah, and thereby adheres to holiness.

The Torah is not just the letters of the Torah, but the revelation of God in the world. Sometimes that revelation finds expression in letters and words, and sometimes in creation itself, in plants and in the heavenly bodies. In light of this, there is a close connection between the Torah that is studied and the Torah that underlies the entire world.

**III. On the Sixth Day**

It is also possible to offer a slightly different understanding. The above *midrash* emphasizes the fact that man was created on the sixth day, and in the Gemara in *Shabbat*,we find a famous *midrash* regarding that sixth day:

For Riesh Lakish said: Why is it written: "And there was evening and there was morning, **the** sixth day (*yom* ***ha****-shishi*)?" (*Bereishit* 1:31). What is the purpose of the additional "the"? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the works of creation and said to them: If Israel accepts the Torah, you shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness. (*Shabbat* 88a)

The foundation of Reish Lakish's words is that the purpose of the world is the Torah. According to this, it is possible to suggest that he who toils in the Torah is "entitled" to change the world in his favor, because his good is the good of the Torah, its expansion and its hold on the world.

**IV. "To God who completes for me"**

The idea that Torah sages have the power to change nature stands at the center of a significant halakhic issue in the laws governing a menstruating woman, and has implications for many other issues as well. The Jerusalem Talmud discusses the theoretical case of a young girl, under three years old, an age at which the hymen is said to repair itself after sexual intercourse. The Gemara raises a scenario in which the court intercalated the third year: Is the extra month counted within those three years, or are the three years during which the girl's hymen repairs itself counted from day to day? Rabbi Avin answers as follows:

Rabbi Avin said: "I will cry to God most high; to God who completes for me" (*Tehillim* 57:3). If a girl is three years and one day old, if the court decided to intercalate the year, her hymen repairs itself; otherwise, her hymen does not repair itself. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 1:2)

That is to say, if the court decides to intercalate the year, the medical reality changes as well, and the girl's virginity returns. The Rashba (*Nidda* 64a) states in the name of the Ra'avad and other *Rishonim* that one of the dates of anticipated menstruation (*vestot*),when a woman must be cautious because her menstrual bleeding is more likely to begin, is the day of the month – that is, the same day of the Jewish month on which her previous menstruation began. The Ramban (ad loc.) is puzzled and does not understand how anticipated dates of menstruation can be calculated in this way, since there is no logical connection between her monthly bleeding at fixed time intervals and the days of the month:

I apply to myself the verse (*Tehillim* 139:6): "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; too high; I cannot attain it." Is menstruation caused by the constellation of the day or the constellation of the hour, that it should depend on the day of the week or the day of the month? Surely it depends on fixed intervals, when the woman has already become full! This is also the way of all women… that they see [menstrual blood] at fixed intervals or at the time of the new moon or the full moon. But that the shofar blast sounded by the court at the beginning of the new month should have an influence is puzzling! In my humble opinion, the earlier authorities did not correctly understand the various anticipated dates of menstruation, for I say that they are only at fixed intervals, because menstruation comes at its time, as this is the nature of people. (Ramban, *Nidda* 64a)

On the face of it, the dispute between these *Rishonim* is precisely about our issue: Do the Torah sages have the power, through sanctification of the month or intercalation of the year, to change the natural reality in our world, or not.[[2]](#footnote-2) The *Chatam Sofer*, however,vigorously refused to accept the idea that the Ramban would dispute the Torah's ability to influence nature and reality:

But the truth will indicate its way, for great study is needed to understand how the Ramban would disagree with the two Talmuds, for in the Jerusalem Talmud, it is explicitly stated: "To God who completes for me," that everything depends on the innovation of the court. And in our Talmud, it is explicit from what is stated: Conclude from here that the shofar blast [at the beginning of the ninth month] causes [the blood emitted during that month to be pure]… How then can the Ramban disagree with this? (*Responsa Chatam Sofer*, *Even ha-Ezer* 3, 6)

Therefore, the *Chatam Sofer* offers a different understanding of the disagreement:

But it seems that the Ramban agrees in all these matters that constitute a rule, e.g., about a girl three years and one day old that her hymen repairs itself, and about a boy thirteen years old that he has two pubic hairs, and the like, *that nature is subject to the Torah and miraculously changes by way of the court's intercalation*.This is not the case regarding a woman's anticipated time of menstruation. Certainly, if the anticipated time of all women were the same, at the beginning or the end of the month or on a specific day, we would say that it should be subject to the shofar blast of the court. But no two women have the same anticipated day of menstruation, and for a particular woman herself it is not the same all the time. If so, why should it depend on the shofar blast of the court, and what need is there for a miracle? This is simple and understandable. (Ibid.)

**V. "The sea saw it, and fled; the Jordan turned backward"**

After establishing the principle that the Torah has the power to change nature, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the continuation of the *midrash* and the dialogue between Moshe and the sea:

At the time of the exodus, the Israelites had not yet received the Torah, and therefore their power to issue decrees concerning the created world did not yet apply. This is why the sea did not agree to split for them, and it was able to argue that Moshe was created on the sixth day, whereas it was created on the third day. This is an allusion to the fact that Moshe was not [then] a Torah scholar, for if he were, he could have claimed to be senior to the sea, because the Torah preceded the entire world. Therefore, God resorted to a stratagem by extending His own right hand alongside that of Moshe's right hand – meaning, He showed him that he was a master of Torah, which relates to the right side, as it is written: "At His right hand [was a fiery law to them]" (*Devarim* 33:2). When the sea saw this, it immediately split, in accordance with the ancient stipulation. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 14:27)

Rabbi Abramsky (see *Chazon Yechezkel*, *Sota* 8a) asks: Why did the sea split only after Nachshon the son of Aminadav jumped into the water (according to *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* on our *parasha*), whereas at the splitting of the Jordan, the river split the moment the soles of the priests touched the water? He answers that the difference stems from the *Or Ha-Chaim*’s point: At the time of the splitting of the Sea of Suf, the Israelites were without the Torah, and therefore the splitting of the sea was more difficult. But in the time of Yehoshua, after Israel had received the Torah, the Jordan split more easily.

This is also how the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the story of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair that we saw above:

Therefore, every righteous man who lived after Israel had received the Torah could bring a promissory note [containing the stipulation that God had made with His creation] and force it to split before him. And you find that when it did not want to split before Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair and his companion, he wanted to impose a penalty on it, and the sea feared him. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 14:27)

**Conclusion**

In this *shiur*,we were introduced to a fascinating dispute between the Rambam and the *Or Ha-Chaim* about the possibility of changing nature. We saw that, according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the entire world is Torah, and therefore Torah sages have the power to influence the world of reality itself.

We will conclude with the *Or Ha-Chaim's* own testimony about himself concerning these matters. In his book *Peri To'ar* on *Yoreh De'a*, he mentions an incident that took place in his city of Baghdad. From time to time, a certain type of locusts would arrive in the city, and the people would eat them. There was no tradition that that type of locust was kosher, and therefore the *Or Ha-Chaim* was puzzled by the local custom. He tried to clarify the matter, and ultimately forbade the people to eat those locusts. This is what he testifies about himself:

I set apart all the individuals of my city and forbade them to eat them… And God justified my words and performed a great miracle. It had been the normal thing that that type of locusts would arrive every two or three years, and no later than four years, but from the time that I proclaimed that they are forbidden, and the sages of the city listened and forbade them, from that time on, that type of locusts was not seen in the west for more than twenty years. (*Peri Toar*, *Yoreh De'a* 85)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The *Or Ha-Chaim* has a similar comment in the book of *Devarim*:

"'And these are the tokens of my daughter's virginity' – the virtues and strength of the Torah are as clear as what can be proven from the garment on which the marriage was consummated. The entire universe was created by way of the Torah and for its sake, and continues to exist only on its account. Any good that is stored away for the world to come, and all the treasure houses of life and goodness, are acquired only through it" (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 22:17). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Mishmeret ha-Bayit* explains: "The *shofar* blast of the court certainly influences, for everything that is done in the earthly court is granted approval in the heavenly court, as it is written: 'which you shall proclaim in their appointed season.' And we rely on the court's determination of the months and intercalation of the years for matters punishable by excision, e.g., eating leavened bread on Pesach, slaughtering the *korban Pesach*, and the afflictions of Yom Kippur.So too regarding the sexual relations of minors, regarding which they said concerning a young girl who is three years old and a day…. And similarly regarding a boy nine years old and a day more or less, we do not count the days, but rather the years, which are composed of full and defective months, and intercalated and regular years, as established by the court. And similarly regarding renewal of the body, as *Chazal* said about a young girl three years old and a day, who had sexual relations, that her hymen does not repair itself, but if the court intercalated the year, her hymen repairs itself, 'To God who completes for me'" (*Mishmeret ha-Bayit* 7, 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)