YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Behaalotekha**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated in memory of  
Rabbanit Yocheved bat Todros Menos Eliyahu *z"l*,   
whose *yahrzeit* is the 14th of Sivan, by her granddaughter Vivian Singer

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**"When You Light the Lamps" – Aharon and the Tribal Princes**

Summarized by Yair Oster

Translated by David Strauss

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon, and say to him: When you light (lit. “bring up”) the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light towards the front of the *menora*. And Aharon did so: he lit (“brought up”) its lamps towards the front of the *menora*, as the Lord commanded Moshe. And this is how the *menorah* was made: a hammered work of gold, to its base [and] to its flowers, it was hammered work; according to the vision that the Lord had shown Moshe, so he made the *menora*. (*Bamidbar* 8:1-4)

Our *parasha* opens with the commandment directed to Aharon regarding the *menora.* Rashi famously comments:

"When you light" – Why is the section of the *menora* juxtaposed to the section dealing with the [offerings of the] tribal princes? Because when Aharon saw the dedication offerings of the princes, he was distressed that neither he nor his tribe was with them in the dedication. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: By your life! Your [part] is of greater importance than theirs, for you will kindle and trim the lamps. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 8:2)

The Ramban cites Rashi and disagrees:

But it is not clear to me why God consoled Aharon [by reminding him of his function] in lighting the lamps, rather than consoling him with the burning of the incense every morning and evening, which is [the specific function of his] with which Scripture praised him, as it is stated: "They shall put incense before You (lit. ‘in Your nostril’)" (*Devarim* 33:10). Or [God could have reminded him of] all the offerings [performed only by his descendants], and the meal-offering of baked cakes, and the Yom Kippur service, which is only valid if done by him, and [only] he enters into the innermost part of the Sanctuary, and he is the holy one of the Lord, standing in His Temple to minister to Him and to bless in His name, and his entire tribe minister to our God! Moreover, what reason was there for Aharon’s distress [upon seeing the offerings of the princes]? Was not his [dedication-]offering greater than that of the [other] princes? For he offered many offerings during those days – all [seven] days of the initiation [of the priests]! (Ramban, *Bamidbar* 8:2)

Despite the Ramban's objections, Rashi's explanation seems reasonable, and Aharon's distress is quite understandable. It is true that "his entire tribe minister to our God," and they serve God in the Temple, but they do so as servants, and dressed as such. In contrast, the princes were chosen by their tribes to bring a unique and festive offering in honor of the dedication of the *Mishkan*, not as servants but as honored guests.

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that Aharon was still in the seven-day mourning period for his two sons, who died on the day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*. He was forbidden from that day to mourn for his terrible loss, and had to maintain "And Aharon held his peace" (*Vayikra* 10:3). He was required to swallow his tears and preside over the service of the *Mishkan*, including the special joy and celebration of the offerings of the tribal princes. It seems that this is the context in which we are to understand Moshe's blessing of the tribe of Levi, "Who said of his father, and of his mother: I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor know his own children; for they have observed Your word, and keep Your covenant" (*Devarim* 33:9) – as expressing praise for Aharon and his surviving sons, Elazar and Itamar, who continued to keep God's covenant despite their loss and mourning over their sons/brothers.

In any event, it seems quite plausible that Aharon would be distressed at the time of the dedication of the altar; and yet, the Ramban's words as he continues are also very reasonable:

But the intention of this homiletic text [that Rashi cited] is to derive an allusion from this section [of the Torah] to the *chanuka* (dedication) of lights that occurred in the period of the Second Temple through Aharon and his sons, namely, [Matityahu] the Hasmonean, who was High Priest, and his sons. And I have found the following text in *Megillat Setarim* of Rabbeinu Nissim, who mentions this tradition, saying: "I have seen in the *midrash*: When [the princes of] the twelve tribes brought the dedication-offerings and the tribe of Levi did not, etc., the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon, and say to him: There is another *chanuka*, which involves lighting of the lamps, regarding which I will perform miracles and salvation for Israel through your sons, and a *chanuka* that will be called by their name, namely, the Chanuka of the sons of the Hasmonean. Therefore He put this section [dealing with the lighting of the lamps] next to the section concerning the dedication of the altar." (Ibid.)

The Ramban here follows his general approach of looking at Torah narratives through a historical prism – things said and done at the time of the Torah shape the future of the Jewish people in the generations to come. At first glance, there seems to be a problem with this approach. Could it be that the story of the Maccabees was preordained, with no chance of free will for the human beings involved? Did the Greeks not decide themselves to issue decrees against the Jews; was it all part of a foreknown Divine plan?

The answer to this question is that the Torah is not speaking of a specific historical incident but of a guiding principle, which can be realized in different contexts throughout the ages. God's words about the special status of the tribe of Levi convey the impressive capacity of the Levites, who constitute the spiritual leadership of the Jewish people, to cope with crises; this principle came to the fore during the days of the Maccabees, but persists both before and after. Aharon himself already demonstrates the ability to move forward and progress, while swallowing our tears and gritting our teeth, submitting painful sacrifices precisely in the face of spiritual difficulties.

The decrees of the Greeks were not in the physical realm – there was no exile and they did not inflict physical punishments – but were instead spiritual decrees that sought to uproot the Jewish spirit. Therefore, it was the simple duty of the Hasmoneans, descendants of Aharon and Levi, to raise the banner of revolt and combat against them. However, as we know, the work of the Hasmoneans did not end with the spiritual struggle: the five sons of Matityahu also took up the reins of military leadership against the Greeks, and even continued to rule the people afterwards. For this, the Ramban criticizes them harshly, in another well-known passage:

This was also the reason for the punishment of the Hasmoneans, who reigned during the Second Temple. They were pious devotees of the Most High, without whom Torah [study] and the [observance of] commandments would have been forgotten in Israel, and despite this, they suffered great punishment. The four sons of the elder Hasmonean Matityahu, saintly men who ruled one after another, fell by the sword of their enemies despite all their prowess and success… All the children of the righteous Matityahu the Hasmonean were removed only for this: they ruled even though they were not of the seed of Yehuda and of the house of David, and thus they completely removed "the scepter" and "the lawgiver" from Yehuda [see *Bereishit* 49:10]. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 49:10)

It is important to note that the problematic aspect of the Hasmonean actions was not in beginning the revolt. That was a situation of "it is a time to act (*et la'asot*) for God” (*Tehillim* 119:126); someone had to snap out of it, take the initiative, and lead the people. Their sin began when they held onto their leadership even after the initial success, confusing the role of the priests with that of the tribe of Yehuda and the house of David.

We have thus seen that the priesthood has authority to take the place of the monarchy, though only as a temporary directive. We may therefore ask: What is the relationship between these two agents, and what is the significance of the "separation of powers" between them? We will examine this question by considering the question of who is superior, the king of Israel or the High Priest? Is there a preference for the physical maintenance of the Jewish people, via "righteousness and judgment," or rather for the spiritual leadership?

The Rambam writes in his *Mishneh Torah*:

The nation must present themselves before [the king] whenever he desires. They should stand before him and prostrate themselves to the ground. Even a prophet must stand before the king and prostrate himself on the ground, as it is stated: "Behold, Natan the prophet came before the king and prostrated himself before the king" (I *Melakhim* 1:23). However, a High Priest need not come before the king unless he desires to do so, and he need not stand before the king. Rather, the king stands before the High Priest, as it is stated: "And [Yehoshua] shall stand before Elazar the priest" (*Bamidbar* 27:21). Nevertheless, it is a mitzva for the High Priest to honor the king, to seat him and to stand in his presence when he visits him, and the king should only stand before him when he will “inquire for him by the judgment of the *Urim*” (ibid.). (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 2:5)

The Rambam rules explicitly that "the High Priest need not stand before the king; rather, the king stands before the High Priest." That is to say, the High Priest holds superior status. However, there are dissenting opinions:

And He said "[I will establish a faithful priest…and he will walk] before My anointed one" because the priest would come before the king to instruct him in the right way, and the king would not come before the High Priest except when he would consult the *Urim* and *Tumim*, as it is written: "And he shall stand before Elazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the *Urim* before the Lord." But at any other time that the king would wish to see the High Priest and speak with him, the priest would come before him, and so said the prophet Zekharya: "And he will sit and rule upon his throne, and there will be a priest on his throne, and a counsel of peace shall be between them both" (*Zekharya* 6:13). And the meaning of “there shall be a priest **on** his throne" is like "**before** his throne," like "standing (*omdim*,[[1]](#footnote-1) *nitzavim[[2]](#footnote-2)*) on him" means "standing before him." (Radak, I *Shmuel* 2:35)

The Radak determines that a king is superior to a High Priest; even though the king comes before the High Priest in the special case of an inquiry of the *Urim* and *Tumim*, the general rule is that the High Priest appears before the king. Similarly, the *Yerushalmi* (*Horayot* 3:5) states: "A king takes priority over a High Priest."

What we see here is that studying the sources only complicates matters further: the tension between the two roles is not only a matter of values but is also disputed in the sources. The High Priest can cite the Rambam, whereas the king can point to the Radak, and the quarrel continues.

The *haftara* read with our *parasha* deals with this very tension:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in My ways, and if you will keep My charge, and will also judge My house, and will also guard My courtyards, then I will give you free access among these who stand by. Hear now, O Yehoshua the High Priest, you and your fellows who sit before you, for they are men of significance, for, behold, I will bring forth My servant, *Tzemach* (the sprout). (*Zekharya* 3:7-8)

Yehoshua, the High Priest, is told here of the future coming of "My servant the sprout." We know what the term "*tzemach*" means from many other places, such as in the *Amida*: "Speedily cause the sprout of David Your servant to flourish." That is to say, Zekharya is prophesying about the coming of the messianic king – and as we have seen, this may be a challenge and even a threat to the High Priest's position. The solution to this difficulty is found in the continuation of Zekharya's prophecy, part of which we saw above:

And speak to him, saying: Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: Behold, a man whose name is the Shoot, and who shall shoot up out of his place, and build the temple of the Lord. He shall build the temple of the Lord, and he shall bear the glory. And he will sit and rule upon his throne, and there will be a priest on his throne; and a counsel of peace shall be between them both. (*Zekharya* 6:12-13)

There is no determination here as to whose throne is superior – that of the king or that of the High Priest. Instead, there is a call that "the counsel of peace shall be between them." Both leaderships, the physical and the spiritual, must recognize the value of the other, and out of that, make peace between themselves.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Behaalotekha* 5777.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. E.g., *Shoftim* 3:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g., *Bereishit* 18:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)