YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL ZT”L**

**“If You Follow My Statutes – Meaning, If You Toil in Torah”**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“If you follow My statutes” (*Vayikra* 26:3) – can this mean fulfilling the commandments? When God says, “and if you observe My commandments” (ibid.), that already covers fulfillment of the commandments, so what must I do in order to fulfill the injunction to “follow My statutes”? It means toiling in Torah. (Rashi ad loc.)

And what is the reward for those who “follow God’s statutes” – i.e., those who toil in Torah? The Torah continues:

I shall give your rains at their proper time, and the land shall give its produce, and the trees of the field shall give their fruit. (*Vayikra* 26:4)

# At first glance, this seems rather surprising. Is this how we envision toiling in Torah – surrounded by material abundance and wealth? Do we not learn in the *baraita*:

Such is the path of Torah: You shall eat bread with salt, and drink water in small measure, and sleep upon the ground, and live a life of deprivation, and toil in Torah. (*Avot* 6:4)

Rabbi Meir Shapira, founder of Yeshivat Chakhmei Lublin, was often asked about the contradiction between the splendor of his yeshiva and this *baraita*. He would answer, quite simply, that the *baraita* was not describing the ideal situation for Torah study, but rather teaching a moral lesson – that one must engage in Torah even if one’s circumstances are dire. (Sometimes he would answer, jokingly, that the *baraita* should be read with a sigh at the beginning: “Indeed, [sigh,] such is the path of Torah…”).

It is clear, in any event, that the *baraita* does not view a life of deprivation and hardship as the ideal situation of toiling in Torah. On the other hand, the Torah does demand that we maintain the proper attitude towards the accumulation of wealth. This is the main focus of *Parashat Behar*: once every seven years we are commanded to stop cultivating the field, to cease for one year the generation of income, and to concern ourselves with social equality and the cancellation of debts. The Torah does not reject the accumulation of wealth, nor does it glorify deprivation and destitution, but at the same time it demands that a person place his financial growth in its proper perspective and remember that “The land is Mine, for you are strangers and residents with Me” (*Vayikra* 25:23).

Getting back to the blessings of *Parashat Bechukotai* – even the most cursory glance reveals that all the blessings apply to all of Israel; there is not a single blessing that pertains to the individual. The Torah’s message here is clear: a person must fulfill the commandments and act in the world with the consciousness of being part of the nation of Israel, not out of personal, selfish motivation. A person may not concern himself only with “What is good for me?” He must ask what is good for the Jewish nation.

# Not only does the Torah make no mention of any material reward or punishment for the individual; it also makes no explicit mention of any spiritual reward in the World to Come. The *Rishonim* point this out and try to explain why. Abravanel discusses the problem at length at the beginning of our *parasha*, and offers different solutions. In keeping with the above, we might suggest a simple answer. By omitting mention of the spiritual reward and punishment, the Torah conveys that the demand that man act for the sake of *Am Yisrael*, and out of a consciousness of and concern for *Am Yisrael*, is not limited to the material sphere: one’s spiritual aspirations should likewise be molded by the same national consciousness.

A person might say: Where is my unique personality then supposed to find expression? Am I nothing but a cog in the wheel, devoid of any special significance within *Am Yisrael*? The answer to this question lies in Rashi’s explanation quoted above: “‘If you walk in My statutes’ – this means that we must toil in Torah.” The mitzva of Torah study reflects, more than any other mitzva, the unique personality of the person who fulfills it. Every person finds himself identifying more strongly with some *mitzvot* than with others, and spending extra efforts on those that he holds especially dear. It is obvious that the manner and frame of mind in which Reuven puts on his *tefillin* is quite different from that of Shimon. Nevertheless, the action that they are doing is fundamentally the same. Torah study is the only mitzva which gives full expression to a person’s personality, with his unique intellect and his unique emotional and moral make-up.

By explaining that the words, “If you follow My statutes” – introducing a unit that is written with a prominently national, social consciousness – refers specifically to Torah study, *Chazal* are teaching us that *Klal Yisrael* is not a collection of identical units. The nation is made up of many different Jews who serve God, each in his own way and with his own personality. It is only through the combination of all of this service together that *Am Yisrael’s* Divine service is created.