YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Shelach**

**SICHA OF HARAV BARUCH GIGI**

**“That You Shall Remember and Do”**

**Adapted by Yair Oster**

Translated by David Strauss

Our *parasha* is found among a series of *parashiot* that describe the tribulations of the people of Israel in the wilderness, while spelling out their various sins. Among all the sins, two sins stand out in their severity – the sin of the golden calf and the sin of the spies.

There are many similarities between these two sins. With respect to both of them, Moshe is compelled to present God with a certain kind of ultimatum. In addition, in both cases he in the end makes use of the strongest tool available to him – the thirteen attributes of mercy. We know that these two sins had long-term ramifications that have lasted to this very day:

R. Yitzchak said: No retribution whatsoever comes upon the world which does not contain a slight fraction of the first calf [i.e., the golden calf in the wilderness], as it is written: "Nevertheless in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." (*Shemot* 32:34)

Rabba said in the name of R. Yochanan: That day was the ninth of Av; and the Holy One, blessed be He, said: They are now weeping for nothing, but I will fix it [this day] for them as an occasion of weeping for generations. (*Sota* 35a)

However, beyond the various similarities between the two sins, there are also significant differences between them. After the sin of the golden calf, there is great turmoil, and a part of the nation is commanded to kill another part. But a second set of tablets was given soon thereafter, and the general course of events continued on the same, original track. In contrast, after the sin of the spies, there is a sharp change in direction, which is reflected in the announcement of another forty years to be spent in the wilderness:

After the number of the days in which you spied out the land, even forty days, for every day a year, shall you bear your iniquities, even forty years, and you shall know My displeasure. (*Bemidbar* 14:34)

What is the reason for the difference in God's reaction to the two sins?

On the most basic level, when the people sin a second time with such a severe sin, it is much worse than the first time that they sinned, as is explained in the *gemara*:

R. Huna said: Once a man has committed a sin once and twice, it is permitted to him. Permitted? How could that occur to you? Rather, it appears to him as if it were permitted. (*Yoma* 86b)

In other words, the very fact that they sinned again shows that we are dealing not with a one-time lapse, but with a fundamental problem.

On a deeper level, however, it seems that this is not only the second time that they commit a similar transgression. The sin of the golden calf took place when the people were still at the beginning of their journey, after their release from Egypt and a sharp transition to extreme conditions. A terrible mistake is committed, but it stems from an honest attempt on the part of the people to serve God:

And when Aharon saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aharon made proclamation, and said: “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” (*Shemot* 32:5)

Aharon himself thinks that this is a kind of "feast to the Lord." Thus, we are dealing here with a positive desire that deteriorates to exceedingly negative places. Therefore, immediately after Moshe prays on behalf of the people, God pardons them in absolute manner and promises to continue to accompany and lead them:

And he said: “If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray You, go in the midst of us; for it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance.” And He said: “Behold, I make a covenant; before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been wrought in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among which you are shall see the work of the Lord that I am about to do with you, that it is tremendous.” (*Shemot* 34:9-10)

In contrast, at the time of the sin of the spies, the people had already had a chance to accustom themselves to the new situation. They had seen and internalized God's greatness, but still they doubted Him. The sin of the spies lay not only in their addition of their personal opinions to their impressions about the land, but in their very approach to God's governance and promise regarding their entry into the land of Israel, an approach at the basis of which stood a need to test God:

And the Lord said: “I have pardoned according to your word. But indeed, as I live, and all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, surely all those men that have seen My glory, and My signs, which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to proof these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swore to their fathers, neither shall any of them that despised Me see it.” (*Bemidbar* 14:20-23)

This time God forgives, but the pardon is immediately followed by a "but." Before they enter into the land, the people must undergo a total change and turn into a completely new nation.

In contrast to the sin, the *parasha* concludes with the section dealing with the *mitzva* of *tzitzit*. *Chazal* saw a need to draw a connection between the two sections, as is noted by Rashi in several places:

"That you go [*taturu*] not after your own heart" – [The verb has the same meaning] as in: "And they returned from searching [*mi-tur*] the land" (*Bemidbar* 13:25). The heart and the eyes are the "spies" of the body – they act as its agents for sinning: the eye sees, the heart covets, and the body commits the sin. (Rashi, *Bemidbar* 15:39)

Rashi expounds the textual connection between the two sections, between *lo taturu* of *tzitzit* and *la-tur ha-aretz* of the spies.

This may be connected to what the *gemara* says about *tzitzit*:

It was taught: R. Meir used to say: Why is blue specified from all the other colors [for this precept]? Because blue resembles the color of the sea, and the sea resembles the color of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of [a sapphire, and a sapphire resembles the color of] the Throne of Glory, as it is said: "And there was under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone" (*Shemot* 24:10); and it is also written: "The likeness of a throne as the appearance of a sapphire stone" (*Yechezkel* 1:26). (*Menachot* 43b)

The *tzitzit* are meant to serve as a constant reminder that God is our king. We are not permitted to test or try Him in any form or manner; we are like servants before their king.

Let us conclude with the words of Rashi:

"[I am the Lord your God] who brought you out of the Land of Egypt to be your God" – On this condition I delivered you, that you should take upon yourselves My decrees. (Rashi, *Bemidbar* 15:41)

(This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Shelach* 5777 [2017].)