YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHAT BO

SICHA OF HaRav AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

"Three Signs of This Nation"

Adapted by Asher Shafrir

Translated by Kaeren Fish

"Bnei Yisrael traveled from Ra'amses to Sukkot, some six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children… And the sojourning of Bnei Yisrael which they had sojourned in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years." (Shemot 12:37-40)

Hundreds of years after the seventy members of Yaakov's household go down to Egypt, their descendants leave – some six hundred thousand men alone, aside from women and children. The difference between the children of Israel who entered Egypt and those who left is not only quantitative but also qualitative: those who went down were a single extended family, while those who left were an entire nation.

The stay in Egypt was not merely a chapter in the life of Yaakov's household and descendants; it represented a process of the formation and molding of Knesset Yisrael. What is obvious is the quantitative development of the nation, and this aspect is indeed emphasized in the Torah: "Your forefathers went down to Egypt as seventy souls, and now the Lord your God has made you like the stars of the heavens for multitude." But at the same time, the Torah takes note of the qualitative development: "God has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a nation unto Him, an inheritance this day."

A furnace is a device for purification, and – in this case – also for sanctification. The purification of Knesset Yisrael in the Egyptian exile is expressed in three spheres. Firstly, the nation was molded for Divine service, and a connection with God in general. It is specifically through the contact and friction with Egyptian culture, and despite partial assimilation into it, that various impurities were removed and the nation's spiritual immunity took hold. The Zohar teaches that specifically when the Jews were "like a rose among the thorns," their spiritual nature could be consolidated.

Secondly, in this "iron furnace" Knesset Yisrael internalized the ability to absorb and withstand suffering; to our great sorrow, the nation has required this quality throughout its existence. Throughout its blood-drenched history, when blows fell – of all types and from all sides - the nation was able to maintain its existence and its special character. This ability was developed on the banks of the Nile, into which the nation's young sons were cast during the Egyptian exile.

Thirdly, the spiritual progress and the effects of suffering together produced a further result: social solidarity, mutual surety, unity and cohesion. These qualities found expression in perfect form only after the Revelation at Sinai, and – later on – upon entering the Land; yet the foundations for them lay in the insufferable common fate of the Egyptian exile. The Gemara in Yevamot (79a) asserts:

"There are three signs of this nation: they are merciful, bashful, and perform acts of kindness."

These traits, which were revealed in their full strength specifically in times of distress and suffering, were bequeathed by Avraham to Yitzhak and Yaakov. Since then, these are the qualities that have characterized Am Yisrael as a whole.

To our sorrow, these three traits of Am Yisrael seem to stand out more prominently in times of difficulty and distress, while fading into the background at times of growth and success. Less than sixty years ago, the State of Israel was established, largely thanks to people who were living exemplars of these three traits. If we understand that, we can understand how such a small country, forced into a constant state of war, could absorb about a million immigrants during its earliest years of existence.

Unfortunately, it seems that during the past half century, these traits have been wearing away. For over thirty days now, dozens of handicapped people have been staging a strike in front of the Ministry of Finance, with the simple aim of being allowed to live with dignity. The sum needed to satisfy all their demands – about a billion shekels (or $250 million) – is not impossible to budget, and the claim that such a sum will cause economic collapse is certainly untrue. The State budgets similar sums – and even greater amounts – for purposes of far less importance, but when funding is required for the weakest sector in the country, suddenly there is no budget.

To our shame, this absence of solidarity characterizes not only the government's approach to the subject, but also the approach of the citizens of the State. When it was proposed that the income tax paid by the wealthiest sector should be raised by a single percent, people expressed the concern that those affected by the law would enlist the help of lawyers and accountants to find ways of getting around paying the additional tax. Are we prepared to surrender to the forces of a capitalist market? The alternative that we are being offered is that the standard of living in this country will regress by five years. Was the situation then so terrible that we can't pay this price in order to provide the handicapped among us with a minimal standard of living?

Along with the attempt to save money at the expense of the handicapped, it was recently suggested that the child allowance for large families be cut. Not surprisingly, we noticed that the Charedi parties were leading the battle against this move. As we know, the financial situation among many large Charedi families is particularly acute, since in many cases the head of the household is not employed, but is rather devoted to full-time Torah study. Putting aside the question of whether this situation is desirable or not, it is clear that even those who criticize the Charedi lifestyle are not exempt from the moral and human obligation to ensure that they enjoy a minimal standard of living. Since one's obligation of tzedaka is not limited to people who agree with his world view, and since so many families, with so many children, are in such dire financial straits – we dare not stand by and do nothing.

The Rambam elaborates on the importance of the mitzva of tzedaka, or charity (Hilkhot Matenot Aniyim 10:1):

"We are obligated to be more scrupulous in fulfilling the mitzva of tzedaka than any other positive mitzva. For tzedaka is the sign of a tzaddik (righteous person), a descendant of Avraham, concerning whom it is written, 'For I know him, that he will command his children to perform tzedaka' (Ber. 18:19). The sovereignty of Israel cannot be established, nor the religion of truth be upheld, except through tzedaka, as it is written, 'Through tzedaka you shall be established' (Yeshayahu 54:14). And it is through tzedaka that Israel will be redeemed, as it is written, 'Zion will be redeemed through justice, and those who return to her through tzedaka' (ibid. 1:27)."

From the very dawn of the Jewish faith, tzedaka and acts of kindness have been the hallmark of the descendants of Avraham. Specifically today, with rising unemployment, a widening social gap and an increasingly capitalistic society, we are obligated to highlight these values and to behave accordingly. Rambam continues:

"All of Israel, and those who attach themselves to them, are like brothers – as it is written, 'You are children of the Lord your God' (Devarim 14:1). If one brother does not have compassion for another brother – who will have compassion on him? And in whom do the destitute of Israel place their hopes? Upon the idolaters, who hate them and persecute them? Clearly, they place their hope in their brethren.

[Therefore,] anyone who turns away from giving tzedaka is called a scoundrel ('beliya'al')… and a wicked one (rasha)… and a sinner (chotei)… For God is close to the cry of the destitute, as it is written, 'You hear the cry of the destitute' (Iyov 34:28). Therefore, one must take care to heed their cry, for a covenant was forged with them, as it is written, 'It shall be that when he calls out to Me – I shall hear; for I am merciful' (Shemot 22:26)." (ibid. 10:2-3)

We are obligated to preserve the traits that have always characterized our nation. When we hear the cry of the handicapped, the call of the weaker sectors, let us be reminded of the traits of Avraham's descendants and try to continue on the path of our forefathers, the nation that emerged from Egyptian slavery.

(This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit on Shabbat Parashat Bo 5762 [2002], during a strike by the disabled against the budget cuts by the Israeli government.)