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 AHARON LICHTENSTEIN**

**"I Will Walk in Your Midst, and I Will Be Your God"**

Summarized by Matan Glidai

Translated by Kaeren Fish

*Parashat Bechukotai* is famous for laying out the rewards for keeping the Torah (*Vayikra* 26:3-13) and the punishments for disobeying it (26:14-45). The apparent imbalance between the "good" and the "bad" motivates the Ibn Ezra to write (ibid., v. 13):

The empty-headed claim that there are more curses than blessings, but this is not true. Rather, the blessings are set forth in general terms, while the curses are specified in detail, so as to frighten the listeners. A good look [at the verses] will confirm this.

Indeed, an examination of the blessings shows that they mention various areas of life in a brief and general manner. In the economic realm, "Your threshing will last until the vintage" (v. 5); in the political sphere, "I will give peace in the land" (v. 6); with regard to the military, "Five of you shall chase a hundred" (v. 8); in reference to the personal, family circle, "I will make you fruitful and multiply you" (v. 9). The climax of all of this abundance is unquestionably to be found in verse 12: "And I will walk in your midst, and I will be your God, and you will be My people."

Rashi explains this Divine promise as meaning,

I will stroll about with you in the Garden of Eden like one of you, and you will not be terrified of Me.

Can it be that you will not fear Me?

[Surely not!] Therefore, the verse says, "And I will [nevertheless] be your God."

The reward that is described here, for fulfilling God's commandments, is very great indeed. On one hand, the Divine Presence will limit itself, to a certain extent, in such a way as to allow mortals to exist in proximity to it; at the same time, *Am* *Yisrael,* the Jewish nation, will be granted enormous spiritual strength, enabling them to "stroll about" with God without terror.

At the same time, these promises involve great danger. Our consciousness of the infinite chasm that separates us from God may become blurred if God goes about in our midst like one of the nation. Therefore the verse continues, "And I will be your God" – in other words, the sense of awe of God will be maintained.

There is a religious approach that tends to emphasize man's nothingness vis-à-vis God and His natural order; it regards man as a weak and lowly creature. From the perspective of this approach, the danger of man losing sight of the distance between himself and God is very small. The concern that Rashi raises exists primarily in view of the approach that emphasizes man's ability and his superiority over other creatures. Man's rule over the animal kingdom and his partnership in the act of Creation may lead him to pride and an over-exaggerated sense of his own importance.

A similar danger may arise from a different direction: man may become arrogant in view of the broad halakhic authority vested in him. The Rambam places a strong emphasis on the greatness of the Sages who are entrusted with the system of Halakha – rulings on questions, auxiliary enactments, etc. The Midrash to *Parashat* *Ki Tissa* (*Shemot Rabba* 41:5) describes the authority of such a sage, depicting his status in terms that are strongly reminiscent of Rashi's description:

This may be compared to a student who is taught Torah by his teacher. Before he becomes learned, his teacher speaks and [the student] repeats after him. Once he has become learned, his teacher says, "Let us speak together, I and you."

So it was, when Moshe ascended to heaven. At first, he repeated Torah after the Creator. Once he had learned it, [God] said: "Let us now say it, I and you."

Greatness in Torah learning may also lead a person to perceive God as his colleague, as it were.

This danger exists not only on the personal level, but also on the national level. In verse 13 we read, "I am Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from being their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and have caused you to walk *komemiyut*." The words "broken the bars of your yoke" refer to the liberation from physical slavery: God freed *Am* *Yisrael* from the shackles and the subjugation of Egypt. The words, "and have caused you to walk *komemiyut*" refer to the liberation from inner subjugation, from the slave mentality. Rashi (ad loc.) explains: "*Komemiyut* — with an upright stature." A person who has been controlled for many years by others has difficulty getting used to thinking like a person who is free. He is used to performing on command, and he may continue to be passive and inactive even when he is free. For this reason, God mentions not only the liberation from Egyptian rule, but also the gift of "upright stature," the restoration of dignity and national pride. However, this "upright stature" may also lead to a diminished sense of fear of God. A nation that is liberated from physical slavery and reclaims its national pride may come to overrate its own power. The Sages are aware of this danger and teach (*Berakhot* 43b), "If a person walks even four cubits with an upright stature, it is as though he pushes aside the feet of the Divine Presence." Therefore, God emphasizes, "They are My servants" (*Vayikra* 25:55) - "not servants of servants" (*Bava Metzia* 10a). *Benei* *Yisrael* are free of the Egyptian yoke of slavery, but they are subject to the authority of God, Who alone can bestow an "upright stature."

This danger arises in our time, too. Unquestionably, the movement to return to Zion has brought about physical salvation for a great number of Jews; no less important has been its effect in restoring their pride. Jews who, in the Diaspora, were subject to persecution and humiliation have now reclaimed their lost dignity. The declaration of the State of Israel imbued Jews everywhere with a sense of pride and "upright stature" – a most positive phenomenon. At the same time, it created the danger of forgetting God, of blurring our awareness of our status before Him.

Many of the concerns that the Torah raises have been realized over the course of the generations. We need look no further than the *shemitta* (remission) year in which we currently find ourselves. Every seventh year, we are charged with two major obligations: to refrain from working the Land of Israel and to remit loans and debts. The Torah predicts that these two *mitzvot* may be challenged.

You may say: "What shall we eat during the seventh year? For we shall be neither sowing nor gathering in our produce!" (*Vayikra* 25:20)

Guard yourself lest an unworthy thought enter your heart, saying: "The seventh year, the year of remission, draws near," making you stingy towards your destitute brother, giving him nothing. (*Devarim* 15:9)

Indeed, we have circumvented both of these *mitzvot*, by way of the *hetter mekhira* (selling Israel's farmland to non-Jews to permit agricultural labor) and the *perozbul* (transferring personal debts to the rabbinical court, which is exempt from the mitzva) respectively.

Similarly, the Torah warns, "Guard yourself lest you forget Lord your God… and you say to yourself, 'My own strength and might have achieved this wealth for me'" (*Devarim* 8:11-17). It must be hoped that this scenario will never be realized! It is a mistake to think that the verse here refers only to a heretical or secular worldview. The verse is also talking about Torah-observant people, whose habitual thinking and sense of "upright stature" have blurred their awareness of God and fear of Him. In the introduction to the *Sefer Ha-mitzvot Ha-gadol*, a compendium of the 613 *mitzvot*, the author writes that after completing the book, heard a voice in a dream telling him that he had left out the most important thing. He woke up in a panic, looked over his work, and found that he had neglected to list this very commandment: "Guard yourself lest you forget Lord your God."

Especially during this month of Iyyar, with all its emphasis on our sense of "upright stature" and national pride, from Yom Ha-atzma'ut to Yom Yerushalayim, we must remember our true proportion and status in relation to God, and acknowledge the miracles that He has performed for us. A Torah-observant Jew must recognize the complexity of his situation: on the one hand, he is a proud Jew who lives in freedom in his own State; on the other hand, he is a servant of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and the awe and fear of Him must never be allowed to fade.

(This sicha was delivered at *Seuda* *Shelishit* on Shabbat *Parashat* *Bechukotai* 5753 [1993].)