**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**"Not by Their Sword Did They Possess the Land,**

**Nor Did Their Own Arm Deliver Them"**

**By Harav Yehuda Amital**

Summarized by Yitzchak Barth and Boaz Kalush.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

On the first verse of the Torah, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," Rashi comments:

"Rabbi Yitzchak said: The Torah should have started with the words, 'This month shall be for you the first month,' which is the first mitzva given to Israel. For what reason, then, does the Torah begin with, 'In the beginning?' Because of the verse, 'He has declared to His people the power of His works, that He may give them the heritage of the nations' (Tehillim 111:6). [In other words,] if the nations of the world would say to Israel, 'You are thieves, for you conquered the land of the seven nations [of Canaan],' they would reply to them: The entire world belongs to the Holy One; He created it and gave it to whomever He chose. At His will it was given to them, and at His will it was taken from them and given to us."

The Ramban amplifies Rashi's answer:

"[Rashi's quotation of Rabbi Yitzchak] raises the following question: [Did the Torah indeed write "In the beginning" only to teach our right to the Land of Israel?] Is it not greatly important that the Torah begin with 'In the beginning God created,' for this is the root of faith, and anyone who does not believe this and thinks that the world always existed denies the fundamental belief and has no Torah at all! The answer is that Creation is a profound secret; it cannot be understood at all from the text... and the people of Torah would have sufficed without this passage, and they would have believed in Creation on the basis of what they were told in the Ten Commandments: 'For in six days God made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in it, and He rested on the seventh day.' ... Therefore Rabbi Yitzchak provides a reason for the Torah starting with 'In the beginning God created:' ... It is proper that when a nation continues to sin, it should lose its place and another nation should come and inherit its land, for such is Divine justice in the world since the beginning... as it is written, 'He gave them the lands of the nations and they seized the labor of the peoples, that they might observe His statutes and keep His laws' (Tehillim 105:44). In other words, He banished from there those who rebelled against Him and established there His servants, so that they would know that they would inherit it through His service. If they would sin, the land would vomit them out as it had vomited out the nation that preceded them."

Rashi explains that the reason the Holy One chose to begin with "Bereishit" was in order to teach us that the entire world belongs to Him. The Ramban develops this idea into an entire world-view: he maintains that it is "Divine justice in the world since the beginning" that the land expels a nation that sins, and that a righteous nation takes its place. This message, in the Ramban's view, is so important that the Torah devotes its first verse to it.

It is important to emphasize that the Ramban does not believe that the Torah opens with "Bereishit" in order to establish our right to Eretz Yisrael. Rather, the first sections of the Torah are actually meant to teach us that Eretz Yisrael is God's land, the palace of the King, and that our inhabitation of it is not only a great privilege, but also a test: if we sin, the land will expel us, as it did the nations that preceded us. To substantiate his view, the Ramban quotes the unequivocal words of the psalmist: "He gave them the lands of the nations and they seized the labor of the peoples, that they might observe His statutes and keep His laws" (Tehillim 105:44).

We identify with the centrist stream of religious Zionism, which has believed since its foundation that in our times, the "beginning of the dawning of the redemption," this principle no longer applies. This view was expressed by Rav Herzog zt"l, when he was asked what the chances were of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael being spared during the Second World War: "We have received a tradition that there will be no third churban (destruction)." Armed with the confidence that there would be no further destruction of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael, Zionism during the past hundred years has achieved great things: the establishment of the State, its security and stability, the large-scale ingathering of the exiles and the – still ongoing – struggle to achieve regional stability. This path has not been easy; it has been paved with wars and bloody battles and innumerable national and personal sacrifices. Nevertheless, we never despaired, and always continued to believe in Divine providence: "Behold, He stands behind our wall, looking through the windows, peering through the lattices" (Shir Ha-shirim 2:9). We continued to believe that in a short time, when we managed to get beyond the bumps in the process of redemption, we would be delivered.

It is specifically in light of this fundamental belief that we should not allow ourselves to be carried away in our assessment of the danger posed by the recent disturbances. These clashes do not represent any real danger to the existence of the State; they do not even significantly disturb the daily routine of most of her citizens. It is certainly inappropriate to compare the current unrest to the wars and the many other truly difficult times that have befallen us since the establishment of the State. The Palestinians, whose power is significantly less than that of the I.D.F., cannot defeat us, since the weak cannot prevail over the powerful except through a miracle.

I am deeply disturbed by the despair and the exaggerated feeling of fear prevalent among large sectors of the population in reaction to the present situation. I see it as an unjustified and worrisome erosion of our power of endurance, both inwardly and outwardly. The Gemara (Shabbat 77b) enumerates five examples of a weak entity threatening a mighty one, among them "the elephant's fear of a mosquito." Rashi explains, "It enters the elephant through its nose." Just as the mosquito in no way endangers the elephant's life, so the riots do not seriously endanger the State of Israel. They may irritate us; like the mosquito that flies into the elephant's trunk they may even sting and cause pain. But ultimately, with God's help, we shall always prevail. For this reason, I fear not the situation but rather the panic over the situation. We need to relate to what is going on with a proper sense of proportion, and to believe (as we have always believed in the past) that the Holy One is truly standing just behind the wall and watching us, and we need to trust in Him and in His guidance.

However, we dare not let our faith in the Rock of Israel blind us to the spiritual significance of the recent events. We have a promise that we will not be expelled from the land a third time, but there is no guarantee that we will live here quietly and peacefully. Just as God watches over us when we are victorious, so He also directs events when our security situation is less than ideal.

There are some who believe that today, as we dwell in sovereignty in our land, there is no longer any need for prayer and supplication. When I participated in a conference of religious Zionist rabbis and ventured to ask why the settlers of Chevron did not declare a day of fasting in light of the trials and tribulations caused them by the Arabs, an important rabbi told me, "When we were in exile, we needed to pray, fast and hope for Divine mercy. Today we have other – military – means of addressing the situation, and we don't need to pray any more. Only in matters that we have no way of influencing by ourselves – such as decisions taken by parliament based on a democratic majority – do we need to ask the Master of the Universe to get involved."

To my mind, this approach is reminiscent of Bar-Kokhba, who is qin the (Ta'anit 4:5) as saying, "Master of the Universe – neither aid us nor hinder us." This is not our way. How distressing it is to hear voices from among our community suggesting from time to time – and especially since the Oslo Accords – that the "end of the State" is drawing near, and that if such-and-such politician continues to lead the country as he is doing, the State will be lost, God forbid. We trust in the knowledge that God has not deserted the land, and that the land has not been given over into evil hands. God has not abandoned His flock and given them over to politicians. Let us not remove the Holy One from the process of history, and let our power and strength not lead us to belittle His guidance. "For it is not by their sword that they possessed the land, nor did their own arm deliver them, but rather Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your face, because You favored them" (Tehillim 44:4).

Together with a lack of fear which we must gain from a strong faith in God's guidance of history, we also need to know that the current events have profound spiritual significance. Bloody clashes and violent unrest are God's way of signaling to us that there is a need for spiritual improvement. It is no coincidence that since the establishment of the State, we have not had even one decade without a war or mini-war. This signal from God is not meant to strengthen our observance of Shabbat, kashrut or Shemitta.

In a famous passage, the Meshekh Chokhma writes (Shemot 14:24),

"If the community is corrupted with idolatry and incest – concerning that it is written, 'Who dwells with them amidst their impurity.' But when it comes to social interaction and character traits, slander and divisiveness ... God, as it were, removes His Shekhina from them... for if the community is corrupt in its character traits, that is worse than if they are corrupt with regard to mitzvot."

There are many areas of our social relations that require mending, and many actions that should be undertaken in order to improve them. We are all obligated to pursue this mission of improvement, and thereby to respond to this call by the Master of the Universe. The Holy One is signaling to us, through the current disturbances, that we need to increase our kindness, charity and justice, to narrow the social rifts and to work towards sanctifying His name.

If I were living overseas right now, I would make every effort to make aliya. Even if I am unable to influence the course of events through my own actions, there is great importance to being in Eretz Yisrael – the land upon which God's eyes are always fixed – especially when the Holy One arranges unusual events in order to hint to us that we should turn to the right path. As during the Yom Kippur War, when I told Rav Lichtenstein that he was privileged to be in Israel at that time, so today it is a great "zekhut" for us to be present at the center of the Divine influence over history, and not on the periphery.

"'And the third will remain in it' – This means that they will be settled in their land only in the third redemption. The first redemption was from Egypt, the second was the redemption [in the days] of Ezra, and the third will have no end." (Midrash Tanchuma, Shoftim 9)

Even if the recent events do not represent a danger to Israel's existence – and they do not – we dare not ignore them. We must respond to the challenge that faces us, and to act to promote the values of justice and morality in society. At the same time, we know that God does not perform miracles for naught (and the birth of the State of Israel was certainly a miracle), and we trust in what our Rabbis have taught – that there will be no third destruction.

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