YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT DELIVERED BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**A United Jerusalem[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

**Sicha of Harav Yaakov Medan**

Translated by David Strauss

Torah study both in and outside the yeshiva setting focuses primarily on bridging an important gap – the gap between the Written Law and the Oral Law.

Among the many gaps that exist in this area, it seems that there is no gap more difficult and blatant than the gap regarding the issue of reward and punishment. In the Written Law, the second passage of *Shema* – "And it shall come to pass, if you listen" – as well as the passages of blessings and curses in *Parashot Bechukotai* and *Ki-Tavo*, describe rewards and punishments in this world. On the other hand, the Oral Law presents us with a world of reward and punishment in the World-to-Come.

The *gemara* describes how Elisha ben Avuya – known as “Acher” – fell into apostasy. Elisha saw a man who sent his son to fulfill the *mitzva* of *shilu'ach ha-ken*, sending away the mother bird before taking her young. The son went to fulfill his father's command, and while he was on the tree he fell and died. Elisha had difficulty with the situation: The boy was fulfilling two *mitzvot*, regarding both of which it is promised "that it may go well with you, and that your days may be long," and while he was fulfilling those *mitzvot*,he died!

This difficult question brought Elisha ben Avuya to change his path. R. Akiva, on the other hand, knew how to resolve this difficulty, explaining the verse: "'That it may go well with you' – in the world that is all good; 'and that your days may be long' – in the world that is all long."

The fact is that the child in this story is not alone. This boy is very much like the boy with the cap in the picture at the entrance to Yad Vashem, who represents millions of children during the period of the Holocaust. The difficulty of the fate of the child whom Elisha ben Avuya saw reflects a general problem faced in his day, the generation of the disciples of R. Akiva.

It is easy to imagine the frustration during that period with respect to the issue of reward and punishment. This was a period in which thousands of R. Akiva's students were killed in the Bar Kokhba revolt, and in the wake of the failure of that revolt, Hadrian began his decrees. When it became necessary to explain how reward and punishment fit with what his generation experienced, R. Akiva shifted to the World-to-Come.

This occurred another time, several generations earlier, in the time of Antigonus of Sokho. In that generation as well, after the time of Shimon the Righteous, there were many difficulties. It was then that Antigonus said:

Be not like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master not with the expectation of receiving a reward, and let the fear of heaven be upon you. (*Avot* 1:3)

 Two of Antigonus's disciples did not agree to believe in reward in the World-to-Come. Their conclusion was clear: If there is no reward in this world and there is no concept of the World-to-Come, then there is no reason to fulfill the commandments*.*

 Thus, there is a great gap between the basic tendency in the Written Law and that of the Oral Law.

There is great logic in this form of reward and punishment presented in the Oral Law. First of all, it is difficult to imagine a world in which all reward and punishment is exclusively physical. It is inconceivable that the spiritual commandments, the lofty ideals, will evoke a response only on the physical plane, in the confines of the world of planting, harvesting, and threshing.

In addition, we see that our world does not offer reward and punishment in accordance with the deeds of the individual. From our earliest years, we are familiar with the question of why righteous men suffer and evil men flourish. This is not a new question; it appears in the book of *Kohelet*, and even earlier. The verses in *Kohelet* describe this difficult reality:

And so I saw the wicked buried, and they entered into their rest; but they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city; this also is vanity. (*Kohelet* 8:10)

The wicked people should have been buried in accordance with the rules of reward and punishment; in practice, they walk about free in the city. The clash between the description found in the Written Law and actual reality is painful and distressing.

The Rambam attempts to reconcile this clash in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (in a passage that I understand in a manner slightly different than the conventional understanding). According to the Rambam, the physical reward described in the Torah is not an independent goal; it merely constitutes a convenient foundation for the observance of the commandments.

Support for this approach may be brought from what is stated in *Parashat Bechukotai* in the middle of the passage of the blessings: “And I will establish My covenant with you” (*Vayikra* 26:9). Then, at the end of the passage describing the physical blessings, it says: “And I will walk among you, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people” (Ibid.26:12). The climax of the blessings, the crowning glory, is that God will walk among us.

This cannot but bring to mind a similar verse:

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden toward the cool of the day. (*Bereishit* 3:8)

This is a reality of paradise – but not a distant paradise, in a place that we call "the World-to-Come." These verses do not describe a distant reality that we will reach, but rather a situation in which the Garden of Eden reaches us, on this earth. It is here, and among us, that God will walk. He will be our God and we will be His people.

Here we reach a very fundamental point: The reward and punishment described in the Torah does not refer to the individual. Both in the passages dealing with reward and punishment and in its general outlook, the Torah relates to the observance of the commandments of the collective, of the nation. It is as if the Torah has no interest in the individual donning *tefilin* or observing Shabbat. The observance of *mitzvot* carries meaning and significance only when those *mitzvot* are fulfilled by the people of Israel as a whole.

This explains the emphasis on public desecration of Shabbat and public observance of Shabbat. This issue of the public Shabbat often reaches the headlines, and it is difficult to underestimate its religious importance.

The relationship between the collective and the individual is not an issue that arises only in our attitude toward *mitzvot.* This is an issue that has frequently arisen in general culture and in general philosophy. In fact, the development of democracy stems from, among other things, focusing on this question.

The first signs of democracy appear in the teachings of the philosopher John Locke, a man described as noble in spirit. He lived during the time of the English Revolution, which was sparked by the exploitation of power and status on the part of King Charles I. After his ouster, England was led for a generation by a man who was not a king, Oliver Cromwell. Against this backdrop, the Anglican Church, as well as the puritanical stream of Christianity, came into being. It was in this generation that John Locke arose and wrote about the rights of the individual.

The rights of the individual also found expression in the teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and were reinforced by the French Revolution. This revolution, the importance of which is almost unparalleled in the pages of history, constitutes an extremely interesting example of the way that God governs His world.

In the declaration written after and as a result of the revolution, there is great emphasis on the rights of the individual. These rights are described with various terms, the foremost being no less than the idea of holiness. The rights of the individual are holy and they must not be desecrated in any way.

The discourse concerning rights is a comprehensive feature of democracy. We are used to hearing about women's rights, the rights of the child, and more. And clearly, the rights of the individual come at the expense of the rights of society as a whole.

Yosef Hayim Brenner coined a phrase that has been attributed to Trumpeldor (who said something similar): "It is good to die for our country." This statement expresses directly and prominently the importance of the nation and the collective in relation to the individual. In contrast, my friend Professor Asa Kasher wrote just the opposite: "It is bad to die for our country." While it is true that this statement was made in a certain context, it is still a very grave statement, which accords with the core values ​​of democracy – the sanctity and rights of the individual.

Mention should be made of the teachings of Immanuel Kant, which, in stark contrast to the attitude described above, express the importance of society and the collective. My colleague Moshe Feiglin began a new discourse concerning rights in the Knesset – the right of the family. The rights of the individual in the family – the child and the woman – actually erode the overall fortitude of the family. We are dealing with a slow and continuous process of the dissolution of the family into individuals with separate rights. The new proposal presents a new and organic body: the family.

This is only an interim step in a process leading to a goal to which we aspire. In our opinion, we must reach a discourse of the rights of the nation, the rights of the people of Israel as a people. If we reach the right of the family, we can also reach the right of the people of God.

If we examine the pages of the Bible and of history, we will learn that for an extended period of time, the people of Israel did not exist as a people. During the time of Yehoshua and the settlement of the Land of Israel, during the time of the Judges, and during the time of Shemuel, there was no unified people of Israel. During the time of Shaul, there should have been unification, but this did not find practical expression. Even when David ruled in Chevron, there were clashes and conflicts between him and the house of Shaul.

The point at which the people of Israel melded into a single unit was when David conquered Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the Yevusite city, is located on the hills between the two strong and rival tribes – Binyamin and Yehuda. David conquers Jerusalem and decides to reign in it, thus unifying the kingdom. The two opposites, the two adversaries, unite into one; David's marriage to Shaul's daughter is supposed to be part of this overall process (although this marriage ran into difficulties at an early stage).

This union takes us many years back, to the time of *Parashat Vayigash*. In that *parasha*, Yehuda endangers himself in order to save Binyamin, thereby uniting the two brothers, the descendants of Rachel and the descendants of Leah.

The union brought about by David did not last very long. After Shelomo's death, the monarchy split again, but the dream of union remained. That unification depended on the building of Jerusalem.

This unification is realized once again after many generations, in the time of Nechemya. Already in the generation that preceded him, there were Jews in Jerusalem, and the altar stood in place. However, Jerusalem as a city did not exist. When Nechemya arrived, he invested a great deal of effort to reestablish the city, to renew it on firm foundations. When he succeeded in his mission, there was a renewal and unification of the Jewish people, as in times of old.

Upon careful examination, we see that throughout the generations, when the Jewish People yearned for redemption, it was not the Land of Israel that stood at the center of their longings. In fact, it is not even mentioned. It is precisely the city of Jerusalem, that place that was chosen by God, that was focus of our people's prayer throughout the years.

Thousands of years after Nechemya, we reach the Israeli War of Independence. David Ben-Gurion's primary effort was around Jerusalem. Ben-Gurion understood the importance of Jerusalem and therefore concentrated much of our forces around it. The struggle for Gush Etzion did not stand in its own right, but rather because of its connection to Jerusalem. As the commander of the forces defending Gush Etzion put it: “Our answer is firm – the eternal Jerusalem.”

It is true that Ben Gurion's efforts in connection with Jerusalem did not focus on the Old City. Limited forces were assembled there, thus leading to the fall of the Jewish Quarter after a heroic battle. In place of the Old City, Mount Scopus was captured. There, the Hebrew University was established as a kind of alternative to the Temple.

This enclave of Mount Scopus remained in our hands the entire period between the wars. Every day, a convoy would arrive. Bus route 98 would make its way through the Mandelbaum Gate to Hadassah Hospital. On one occasion, on the fourth of Nissan, the convoy encountered an ambush that led to the massacre of seventy-eight people on the bus.

However, the State of Israel continued to hold on to this enclave until the Six-Day War. Great numbers of forces surrounded Jerusalem in this war as well, a war in which countless miracles occurred. The Paratroopers Brigade was landed in Jerusalem, not as planned, but only because a rumor spread that Mount Scopus had been captured. Already when this rumor was first heard, it was clear that it was false, but this threat was sufficient to direct the brigade to Jerusalem.

Among the multitude of miracles, two stand out in particular: The second is R. Goren's blowing of the shofar at the Western Wall. The entire nation of Israel was witness to this blowing of the shofar. This shofar blast was heard on the radio, in Israel and abroad, all across the world. For one minute, one very holy minute, it seemed that there was some kind of an echo of the shofar blast that the people of Israel heard at Mount Sinai. Once again, all of Israel directed their hearts to their Father in heaven and accepted upon themselves the yoke of heaven.

 The comparison between the R. Goren's blowing of the shofar and the revelation at Mount Sinai stands. Of course, there are great differences, but the basic comparison remains. This was the second miracle.

 However, the greatest miracle, the miracle that is hard to describe, is none other than the establishment of a unity government against the backdrop of the war. It is hard to imagine Ben Gurion and Begin shaking hands after so many years of rivalry – rivalry that included, among other things, the Altalena affair, which remained a stinging memory in the relationship between the two.

Despite all these memories, the two agreed to unite – unity that arose once again against the backdrop of the unification of Jerusalem.

The essence of the Torah lies not in individuals, but in the entire people of Israel, and this unity of the people of Israel depends on the unification of Jerusalem. We find ourselves on the eve of Jerusalem Day, on which we commemorate these two miracles, along with all the other miracles from that war. Let us not forget the tremendous importance of this unification in the Jewish People.

The prophet said:

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God. (*Yeshayahu* 43:12)

The existence of God Himself does not depend on our existence at all. However, His existence as God certainly depends on the fact that we are His witnesses. Scripture teaches, as it were, that if we are not God's witnesses, He will not be God. This is Jerusalem; this is its role and this is its power. A city that is united together.

1. \* This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat, *Parashat Behar*, and it was adapted by Elisha Oron. It was not reviewed by Rav Medan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)