YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Nitzavim**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**"The Secret Things Belong to Hashem"**

Summarized by David Oren

Translated by David Strauss

The secret things belong to Hashem our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. (*Devarim* 29:28)

This verse, which closes the section, should presumably be connected to thatsection, but at first glance, it is not clear how.

What is clear from the verse is that there is a certain division of labor between God and us. We take it upon ourselves to deal with those things that are revealed, whereas God is responsible for the “secret things.” Rashi explains:

"The secret things belong to Hashem our God" – And if you say: But what can we do? You threaten the many [the whole community] with punishment because of the sinful thoughts of one individual, as it is stated (v. 17): "Lest there be among you a man," and afterwards it states (v. 21): "And they will see the plagues of that land." But surely no man can know the secret thoughts of his fellow! [I reply:] I do not punish you for secret thoughts, for these belong to the Lord our God and He will exact punishment from that individual. But those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children, that we may put away the evil from our midst; and if we do not execute judgment against them, the whole community will be punished. (Rashi, ad loc.)

At the end of his remarks, Rashi adds a proviso to the punishment that will be meted out against the community:

There are dots on the words "to us and to our children," to suggest that even for the revealed sins, He did not punish the community until they had crossed the Jordan River, from the moment when they took upon themselves the oath on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival and had thus become responsible for one another. (Rashi, ibid.)

In other words, punishment of the community for sins committed by individuals is conditioned on the mutual responsibility that the people of Israel took upon themselves.

Rashi's source is the *gemara* in *Sanhedrin,* although there we find a Tannaitic dispute on the matter:

"The secret things belong to Hashem our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever." Why are the words “*lanu u-levanenu*” (to us and to our children) and the letter *ayin* of the word “*ad*” (forever) dotted? To teach that God did not punish for transgressions committed in secret until Israel crossed the Jordan; these are the words of R. Yehuda. R. Nechemya said to him: Did God ever punish [all Israel] for crimes committed in secret? Does not Scripture say "forever"? But just as God did not punish [all Israel] for secret transgressions [at any time], so too did He not punish them [corporately] for open transgressions until they crossed the Jordan. (*Sanhedrin* 43b)

The question that R. Nechemya did not ask, but that nevertheless cries out to us, is: How can it be that God punishes for secret transgressions? As Rashi points out: "Surely no man can know the secret thoughts of his fellow." If the heart of a certain individual secretly turned away from God, how can society know about that and deal with it?

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### Secret Things That Are Like Things That Are Revealed

The answer is that there are different types of "secret things." There are sins through which a person turns completely away from the accepted norm. He engages in forbidden actions that are utterly delusional, and he does so only because "his heart has turned away this day from the Lord."

Most sins, however, are not like that. We refer to sins that involve a deviation from what is accepted by the community, but only a minor deviation. The sinner commits actions that society considers to be forbidden, but not impossible.

Let us illustrate this from a totally different area. In Israel, there are individuals who see themselves as the messiah, whereas in the United States, there are those who think they are God. What is the difference between the United States and Israel? In the United States, the central religion is Christianity. There they believe that man can be God; thus, even someone who suffers from mental illness aspires to that rank. In Israel, on the other hand, the central religion is Judaism, in which man cannot be God, and the highest degree that can be reached is that of the messiah.

This is the kind of "secret things" for which society can be punished. When society does not totally negate certain actions but only says that they are forbidden, a person who is not particularly concerned about violating prohibitions will transgress them.

For example, in today's religious society, the term "*shomer negi'a*," one who observes the laws of *negi'a* (the prohibition of sensual physical contact with a member of the opposite sex), has taken root. There are religious people who observe these restrictions and there are those who do not. Religious society is not willing to accept the reality of religious people who do not keep Shabbat, but it is willing to accept the reality of religious people who do not keep the restrictions on *negi'a*, even though it maintains that such activity is forbidden! This is a failure of mutual responsibility for which the community as a whole can be punished.

Another point that arises in this section is the comparison that is made to Sedom:

And that the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and a burning, that it is not sown, nor bears, nor any grass grows therein, like the overthrow of Sedom and Amora, Adma and Tzevoyim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and in His wrath. (*Devarim* 29:22)

The main problem in Sedom was the lack of responsibility, the failure of one person to take responsibility for his fellow. This is also one of the main messages of the book of *Yona* – taking responsibility. This is the way the king takes responsibility for the people of Ninveh:

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water. (*Yona* 3:7)

The mariners also take responsibility for Yona. They are unwilling to throw him into the sea, even after he tells them that it is he who sinned and that he is the cause of the storm, and even though he is simply a passenger who is putting their lives in danger.

These two points – manifest conduct that prevents forbidden secret behavior and the assumption of overall collective responsibility – are what society needs so that it be able to fulfill the covenant as required and not reach a state of "brimstone, salt, and burning."

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### "Who Can Discern His Errors? Clear You Me from Hidden Faults"

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Until now, we have discussed punishing the community for the secret sins of an individual. But there is another type of "secret things" – things that are concealed even from the individual himself, sins that a person commits, without even knowing that he has committed a transgression. This is what the Ramban writes regarding "the secret things belong to the Lord":

The simple understanding is that "the secret things" are sins that are concealed from those who commit them, as in: "Who can discern his errors? Clear You me from hidden faults" (*Tehillim* 19:13). He says that the secret things belong to God alone; they are not an iniquity for us. But the things that are revealed – that is, the deliberate sins – belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of the law. (Ramban, *Devarim* 28:29)

Here, too, there are "secret things," situations in which a person is totally unaware that he is doing something forbidden. There are, however, secret things that stem from revealed ones. If I say something to another person that offends him, even without noticing what I did, it may be because my general attitude toward that person is flawed. The same applies to *mitzvot* between a person and God. If a person desecrates Shabbat by performing actions that he does not know are forbidden, out of an underlying contempt for the importance of Shabbat, this is not really included in "secret things."

It is now a few hours before Rosh Hashana. Erev Rosh Hashana offers us a final opportunity for improvement before the Day of Judgment. On this day, Ashkenazim recite many *selichot*. But let us not be confused. These are actually *selichot* of Rosh Hashana, but because it is impossible to recite *selichot* on Rosh Hashana, we recite them a day earlier.

On Rosh Hashanah, judgment is passed over every person as an individual and over the community as a whole. The *gemara* states that the community is answered whenever it calls out to God, whereas the individual was given the Ten Days of Repentance, when God is close to all who call out to Him. One of the things that we must examine both as a community and as individuals is whether our "revealed things" are sufficiently good so that they prevent bad "secret things" from happening.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Nitzavim* 5779, *Erev Rosh Hashana*.]