YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat Vayelekh**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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This week's shiurim are dedicated in honor of longtime
VBM editor Meira Mintz, with gratitude for her outstanding contribution to the readability and clarity of thousands of our shiurim.

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**"And Rejoice with Trembling"**

Summarized by Nadav Schultz

Translated by David Strauss

In many ways, the Ten Days of Repentance are the climax of the year. The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur should be more intense, more focused and profound.

The Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* provides two sources for the special character of the Ten Days of Repentance. The first is a verse cited in apparent contradiction of a statement that God is always available to those who wish to improve their relationship with Him:

But it is written: "Seek the Lord while He may be found" (*Yeshayahu* 55:6). This verse speaks of an individual; the other, of the community. When can an individual [find God]? Raba bar Avuha said: These are the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. (*Rosh Hashana* 18a)

According to this passage, the Ten Days of Repentance reflect a unique opportunity in the relationship between an individual and God. While the community as a whole is in a constant state of closeness with God, the individual has a specific time frame in which he can bring himself closer to God. This closeness is the basis of the uniqueness of the Ten Days of Repentance.

The Gemara continues:

"And it came to pass, after the ten days, that the Lord smote Naval" (I *Shemuel* 25:38). What are these ten days doing here?... Rav Nachman said in the name of Raba bar Avuha: These are the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Here, the role of the Ten Days of Repentance is radically different. In the Gemara’s second source, the ten days are used for much more technical reasons than in the first. Naval was sentenced, but he was given ten days to plead for mercy for his life. When he failed to do this, and remained entrenched in his sin, his sentence was carried out and he died.

Though it stands to reason that the incident involving Naval took place in the spring, the principle is the same. Like Naval, the people of Israel, whose sentence is issued on Rosh Hashana, are given ten days during which they can plead for mercy and try to change a negative sentence.

We can gain further insight from a distinction found in *Gittin.* In the process of a divorce, the main thing is the writing of the *get*; signing the document is only a final confirmation. Similarly, the main law of the Ten Days of Repentance stems from the writing of the sentence on Rosh Hashana, and the Ten Days of Repentance serve only to allow a final plea to introduce changes before the signing.

A related idea can be seen in two approaches to the month of Elul. One is aimed at Rosh Hashana. We blow the shofar, recite *selichot*, and try to improve ourselves – all in anticipation of the Day of Judgment that awaits us.

On Rosh Hashana, we seek the appearance of the kingdom of God in our world. This is a kingdom that demands strict judgment, from which none of us is guaranteed to come out vindicated. The statement recited in our Rosh Hashana *tefilot*, "Reign over the entire world in Your glory, be exalted over all the earth in Your splendor," is not mere words but is based on a verse in the book of *Yeshayahu*:

The lofty looks of man shall be brought low, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. (*Yeshayahu* 2:11)

Only after “the lofty looks of man” are “brought low,” and “the haughtiness of men” is “bowed down,” shall the full kingdom of God make its appearance and “the Lord alone shall be exalted.”

There is, however, a second and different aspect found in the month of Elul, related to the receiving of the second set of tablets – a process that began on the first of Elul and ended on Yom Kippur. This approach does not include passing through the Day of Judgment, but, as it were, skipping over it. The rationale behind this understanding is found in the above model of the special closeness between God and His people.

Yom Kippur represents the closest intimacy between God and His people. As the Gemara states:

There were no holy days as happy for Israel … as Yom Kippur. (Mishna, *Ta'anit* 4:8)

In addition, there is the well-known statement of *Chazal* about the opening of the curtain separating between the Holy and the Holy of Holies:

Whenever Israel came up for the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the *keruvim* were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman. (*Yoma* 54a)

The Holy of Holies represents the closest intimacy possible between man and God. Therefore, only on a day of such closeness – Yom Kippur – is the High Priest permitted to enter the Holy of Holies.

However, even on Yom Kippur itself, both aspects exist. There seems to be no "motto" that represents the day more than: "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (*Tehillim* 2:10). Service and rejoicing on the one hand, and fear and trembling on the other. These two sides both find expression in the various prayers: *Musaf*, with the sacrificial service it describes, represents service; *Ne'ila* and the supplications included in it represent fear.

While we often speak of the relationship of intimacy on these days, it is also important to understand the aspect of fear during this period. Preachers from the schools of the *Mussar* movement would warn the congregation that there may be someone right now in their synagogue whose death sentence has been issued – *gavra ketila* ("a dead man"), as they would call him. That is, if his sentence is not torn to shreds on Yom Kippur. The essence of this idea is profound and poignant – nothing in our lives should be taken for granted, and it behooves us to cry out and pray.

The *Meiri,* in his book "*Magen Avot*," mentions the ancient custom in Provence to recite "*Avinu Malkeinu*" on Shabbat Shuva and describes the fierce criticism of this custom by disciples of the Ramban. However, the sentiment behind the custom is clear: it is appropriate to sacrifice one Shabbat to pray that the evil decree issued against us be torn up, and that we be sealed for good life.

The *Shulchan* *Arukh* calls upon a person to accept stringencies during these ten days, even if he will not persevere with them later in the year. Some see this as hypocrisy, but this is not the case. On these days, when a person comes to plead for his life, all he can do is reveal his true desires. Acceptance of such stringencies, even for a short period of time, accomplishes just that: It is true that at the moment I am not in a place where I can accept these stringencies upon myself for my entire life, but deep down, this is what I aspire to.

The Rambam as well calls upon man to feel the weight of the responsibility that is placed on his shoulders and to focus on his aspirations. First, he prefaces:

Each and every person has merits and sins. A person whose merits exceed his sins is [termed] righteous. A person whose sins exceed his merits is [termed] wicked. If [his sins and merits] are equal, he is termed a middling. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:1)

Therefore, he adds:

Accordingly, throughout the entire year, a person should always look at himself as equally balanced between merit and sin. (ibid. 3:4)

Every person maintains a balance between merits and sins. One who has a positive balance is defined as righteous. One whose sins outnumber his merits is considered wicked. The third category is a person who has an equal number of merits and sins; he is called a middling. Ostensibly, this is a simple matter: a person's balance determines his standing – righteous, wicked, or middling.

Later on, however, the Rambam rules:

Since free choice is granted to all men, as explained, a person should always strive to repent. (ibid. 7:1)

Rav Yitzchok Hutner asks in his book "*Pachad Yitzchak*": Why does the Rambam call on a person to strive to repent? He should have issued this call as a command: "Therefore, a person must repent!" What is the Rambam's reasoning?

Rav Hutner explains that the definitions of wicked, righteous, and middling are not based on the number of a person's merits or sins. If this were the case, all a person would have to do is improve the balance between his sins and his good deeds. A person's standing is actually determined by his consciousness: he who aspires to observe a commandment is defined as righteous; he who does not aspire is defined as wicked; and he who is somewhere in the middle is defined as a middling. In order to transform oneself from a middling to a righteous person, what is required is a change of consciousness, or as the Rambam calls it, striving.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Vayelekh* 5778.]