YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat naso - shavuot**

**SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN *SHLIT"A***

**"The Day that You Stood before the Lord at Chorev"**

Summarized by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

On *Shavuot*, we celebrate *kabbalat ha-Torah*; but the word "*kabbala*" can be understood in two different ways.

On the one hand, we "received" the Torah as a gift. Indeed, the Torah is "more precious than fine gold and pearls;" on Shavuot, we must thank God for the gift that He has bestowed on us and for granting us the privilege of this great treasure.

On the other hand, we "accepted" the Torah. "Acceptance" can be understood as the internalization of a value or idea. The expression "*kabbala le-atid*" – accepting a resolution upon oneself for the future – implies the internalization of one's repentance and an attempt to live accordingly in the future. According to this interpretation, we must explain what exactly it was that *Am Yisrael* accepted at that exalted occasion at Sinai. What was given to the nation as a legacy for the future, continuing many generations after God’s revelation?

This question assumes special significance in light of the fact that Ramban, in his glosses on Rambam's *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (prohibitions, addition #2), counts the remembering of the revelation at Sinai as a commandment: "Take heed to yourself, and guard your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life, but teach them to your children and your childrens' children: the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev…" (*Devarim* 4:9-10). According to this understanding, we must understand what it is that we are meant to remember. Which values are we meant to internalize as part of our remembrance of the acceptance of Torah?

There are a number of points to which *Am Yisrael* committed themselves and which they accepted upon themselves at Sinai.

As we know, there are commandments that are not set down explicitly in the Torah; the Sages throughout the generations have interpreted the Torah and revealed these commandments. Seemingly, a person could claim that the system of Halakha as we know it is not what he committed himself to at Sinai. There, we accepted the obligation of a certain number of commandments, but we never committed ourselves to the obligations imposed later by the Sages, such as, for example, the reading of the *megilla* on Purim!

We therefore must understand that at Sinai, the nation did not accept each individual commandment, but rather the entire body of commandments as their subjugation to God. The very first commitment of *Am Yisrael* at Sinai was towards the fulfillment of that general system of Halakha, not each law individually. This idea is proposed by R. Yosef Baer Soloveitchik (the *Beit Ha-Levi*) to resolve the difficulties that he discerns in the obligation of *Am Yisrael* to all of the commandments.

The *gemara* (*Shabbat* 88b), in discussing the revelation at Sinai, tells us:

"They stood at the foot of the mountain" - R. Avdimi bar Hama said: This teaches that God held the mountain over them like a cask, and said to them: "If you accept the Torah [- then well and good]; and if not – there you will be buried" … Rava said: [Although it would seem that the Torah was accepted because of coercion], nevertheless it was re-accepted [willingly] in the days of Achashverosh, as it is written: "The Jews fulfilled and accepted" – they fulfilled that which they had already accepted [at Sinai].

The generally accepted meaning of this *gemara* is that at the time of Mordekhai and Esther, the Jews willingly accepted upon themselves the Torah that they had accepted through coercion at the time of the revelation at Sinai. However, we may perhaps propose another interpretation which, to my view, reflects the simple, literal meaning of the *gemara*. At the time of Mordekhai and Esther, "the Jews fulfilled that which they had already accepted." Until the time of Esther, *Am Yisrael* fulfilled the commandments as part of the overall subjugation to God to which they had committed themselves at the time of accepting the Torah; from that time onward, they also committed themselves to each and every individual law, so as to fulfill that which they had already accepted in the general sense.

Furthermore, at Sinai, the nation accepted upon itself not only the laws, but also God as Creator and Master of the world; the nation accepted the Kingship of God, and since that time this faith has been "the pillar of all wisdom and the foundation of all foundations." The faith that the nation took upon itself was not limited to the acceptance of God's existence, but also other beliefs that are integral to Judaism. At Sinai, *Am Yisrael* accepted fundamental beliefs that remain binding to this day, as part of the concepts and principles that are the "red lines," the definitive framework of faith, in which every Jew believes.

The last element that we may list as a commitment by every Jew at Sinai is the belonging to the nation of Israel and the concept of the nation of Israel as a single body, with everyone connected to everyone else. At Sinai, the status of *Am Yisrael* was established as a special nation in which every individual is meant to feel a part of, and connected to, his fellow; thus, a collection of individuals is forged into a nation. From that time on, every individual Jew is obligated to accept upon himself his belonging to the nation of Israel and to recognize that all of us belong to the same entity, with each responsible for the other.

All of these elements are contained in the command "Take heed … lest you forget … the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev"

(This sicha was delivered on Shavuot 5763 [2003].)