YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Shavuot**

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

**Torah of Fire and Water**

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"All Jews have a portion in the World to Come…

These have no portion in the World to Come: One who says … the Torah is not from the heavens (*ein Torah min ha-shamayim*)." (Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1)

What is the meaning of "Torah from the heavens" (*Torah min ha-shamayim*), a concept whose rejection entails the loss of one's portion in the World to Come? At the beginning of *parashat Bereishit* (1:8), Rashi explains the meaning of the word "*shamayim*" (heavens):

"And God called the firmament *'shamayim'*… – He mixed together fire (*esh*) and water (*mayim*), forming from them the '*shamayim*.'"

Since the Torah is given "from the *shamayim*," it too contains both an element of fire and an element of water, and these are combined and interwoven. In *parashat Yitro*, we learn that the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai amidst fire; in the book of *Shoftim* (5:4-5), we find that it was also given in water:

"Lord, when You emerged from Se'ir, when You marched out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, also the heavens dripped; **also the clouds dripped water**. The mountains melted from before the Lord, **even Sinai**, before the Lord God of Israel."

Water represents primal existence. Even before Creation, God's spirit hovered over the water. Water is the most basic necessity for man and for all life; it therefore expresses naturalness. There is nothing more natural, more primeval, than a spring gurgling in a place that no human eye has ever seen and where no human foot has ever trodden.

Fire, in contrast, is a product of technology. Fire expresses creativity, innovation, and dynamism. The discovery of fire is one of the most important revolutions in human history, the basis for all subsequent technology. Unlike water, which is to be found around us in nature, a person who needs fire must seek it, pursue it, work to create it.

Despite the obvious differences between fire and water, in Halakha they share a common denominator: both of them serve to purify, and neither of them can contract ritual impurity. The Gemara rules that fire cannot become impure (*Berakhot* 22a), and that it purifies like water (*Sanhedrin* 39a). Water, too, purifies, and when it is gathered in a mikve, it does not contract impurity.

The Torah, given in fire and in water, shares characteristics with both of them. Like water, the Torah too preceded the creation of the Earth. The world was created only for the sake of the Torah, which is called "*reshit*" (the first). The Torah is primal and natural: God "looked into the Torah and created the world" (*Zohar*, *Teruma* 161a). On the other hand, like fire, Torah also has a creative, dynamic, developing dimension. The Gemara compares the words of Torah to plants: "Just as this plant is fruitful and multiplies, so the words of Torah are fruitful and they multiply" (*Chagiga* 3b).

In addition, like fire and water, Torah does not contract impurity (*Berakhot* 22a): "'Is not My word like fire, says God' – just as fire cannot become impure, so the words of Torah cannot become impure." Finally, like fire and water, Torah purifies those who involve themselves in it, and sanctifies them.

In the time to come, we are promised, the redemption too will come in a combination of fire and water. The prophet Yechezkel speaks of a river that emerges from the Foundation Stone on the Temple Mount and revitalizes the Dead Sea (chapter 47). Also, we know that just as God set Jerusalem ablaze, bringing about its destruction, He is destined to rebuild the city with fire, as we learn: "I shall be for it [Jerusalem], says God, a wall of fire round about" (*Zekharia* 2:9).

There are other points of similarity between the Torah, on the one hand, and fire and water, on the other. Both fire and water are capable of great destruction, but they are also able to build. In *parashat Bereishit* we read of the creative power of water, giving life to fish and to the bird kingdom. In the next *parasha*, *Noach*, we read of the destruction by the Flood, annihilating all living things off the face of the earth. Fire, too, has tremendous potential for creating, building, and renewing, but it is also able to destroy, as in the case of Sedom and Amora, and – thousands of years later – also our holy Temple.

The Torah, too, has the power to bring life into the world, but also to bring destruction, heaven forefend, as the Gemara teaches (*Yoma* 72b):

"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: What is the meaning of the verse that states, 'This is the Torah which Moshe placed (*sam*) before Bnei Yisrael…'? If a person is worthy, the Torah is the elixir (*sam*) of life for him; if he is not worthy, then for him it is a potion (*sam*) of death."

The difference between Torah that is an elixir of life and Torah that is a deadly poison depends on the attitude of the person who approaches it:

"Rabbi Bena'ah used to say: Anyone who engages in Torah for its own sake – his Torah is like an elixir of life for him, as it is written, 'It is a tree of life for those who grasp it…' But anyone who engages in Torah not for its own sake – the Torah becomes like a deadly poison for him, as it is written, 'Let My teaching drop (*ya'arof*) as rain' – and the term *'arifa'* alludes to death." (The same verb can be used to mean breaking the neck.) (*Ta'anit* 7a)

The Torah is capable of bringing a person to holiness, purifying and elevating him to wondrous levels of spirituality – but everything depends on the proper approach. A person who does not approach Torah out of thirst and longing, with a desire to study Torah for its own sake, may heaven forbid be greatly endangered. But when a person adopts the proper approach, knowing and internalizing the fact that the Torah is "our life and the length of our days," and that without it there can be no life, then it is truly an elixir of life for him.