YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Ki tetze**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**Justice and Mercy in the Month of Elul**

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**Introduction**

In describing the laws of an *eshet yefat to’ar* (a non-Jewish woman taken captive in war) at the beginning of *Parashat Ki Tetze*, the Torah states: "And she shall weep over her father and her mother for a month of days" (*Devarim* 21:13). A fascinating exposition in the *Zohar* identifies this month of tears with the month of Elul:

"And she shall weep over her father and her mother a full month." This is the month of Elul, during which Moshe ascended the mountain to pray for mercy before the Holy One, blessed be He, that He forgive Israel for the sin of the golden calf. (*Zohar Chadash*, *Parashat Ki Tetze* 96b)

According to the *Zohar*, the verse refers to the month of Elul, when Moshe ascended Mount Sinai to ask God to have mercy and forgive the people for the sin of the golden calf. The person weeping is Moshe, the "father" mentioned in the verse refers to God, and the "mother" is the Torah. What is the meaning of this exposition, and what is the meaning of the twofold weeping (“over her father and mother”)?

This doubling seems to be connected to a certain duality that characterizes the month of Elul: just as parents typically represent discipline and affection, so too Elul embodies fear and justice, on the one hand, and love and mercy, on the other.

**Mercy**

We will start with the second aspect, that of love and mercy. This aspect is well expressed by the *Zohar*’s connection between the verse and Moshe's forty-day ascent to Mount Sinai, from Rosh Chodesh Elul to Yom Kippur.

In order to understand what exactly happened when Moshe ascended on high, let us go back to his first ascent, in the month of Sivan. When Moshe first ascended the mountain to bring the Torah down to the people of Israel, the world in general and the people of Israel in particular had reached an almost perfect state. The day before, the *Shekhina* had descended on Mount Sinai, and now Moshe was ascending the mountain to fulfill what had been said to him at the burning bush: "When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain" (*Shemot* 3:12).

This idyllic state of affairs was shattered forty days later, however, when the people committed a grave offense with the golden calf. In response, God lashed out at the people and wanted to destroy them:

Also in Chorev you aroused the Lord's wrath, and the Lord was angered with you to have destroyed you. (*Devarim* 9:8)

Moshe did not stand on the sidelines. He immediately prayed to remove the decree:

So I fell down before the Lord the forty days and forty nights that I fell down; because the Lord had said He would destroy you. And I prayed to the Lord, and said: O Lord God, destroy not Your people and Your inheritance, that You have redeemed through Your greatness, that You have brought forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember Your servants, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov; look not to the stubbornness of this people, nor to their wickedness, nor to their sin; lest the land from where You brought us out will say: Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land which He promised to them, and because He hated them, He has brought them out to slay them in the wilderness. Yet they are Your people and Your inheritance, that You brought out by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm. (*Devarim* 9:25-29)

In his prayer, Moshe gives two reasons why the people of Israel should not be destroyed: because of the merits of the Patriarchs and in order to prevent a desecration of God's name.[[1]](#footnote-1)

These forty days ended at the end of the month of Av, and on the first of Elul, Moshe ascended the mountain for a third time. This time, Moshe went up not to save Israel from calamity, but to convert God's anger and wrath toward the people into love.

If until now the situation paralleled that of a father who was angry with his son, now it becomes more analogous to a case of a husband and wife who quarreled and are making up. "Ulla said: O shameless bride who fornicates under the bridal canopy" (*Gittin* 36b) – that is to say, the golden calf was a betrayal akin to betrayal of a spouse. The goal of Moshe’s third ascent was to bring the couple back to their initial love – as indeed happened on Yom Kippur, when the people of Israel were forgiven for the golden calf and achieved atonement.

The restoration of love in this relationship illustrates the first axis that characterizes the days of Elul: love and mercy.

**Justice**

The other aspect of the month relates to the dread of justice. The thirty days of Elul are the last days before "the King sits on the throne of justice and the books of the living and the books of the dead are open before Him" (*Rosh Ha-shana* 32b). There is nobody who, during the month before he stands trial, would not make final preparations, consult with his lawyer, and do everything possible to ensure that he will vindicate himself in the trial.

We, too, as we approach the day of judgment, must surely fear it. This perspective connects well to the blowing of the shofar and the recitation of *selichot* – which evoke the dread of impending judgment – during Elul.

**Love**

Let us return to the previous axis, that of love and mercy, to complete the picture regarding the sin and atonement for the golden calf and see how this axis is expressed in the individual’s relationship with God.

As already stated, the sin of the golden calf parallels infidelity between spouses. In light of this, we can also find a parallel in the story of *Shir Ha-Shirim*: A couple is described who love each other very much, but just as we reach the climactic point of "Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his precious fruit" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:16) comes the crisis of "I sleep, but my heart wakes" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2) and "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:3). However, despite this dip in the relationship, verses of mutual love that had been said earlier are then repeated afterwards, almost verbatim.[[2]](#footnote-2) Their love returns to what it had been before the fall.

Thus, we understand the process of atonement that is expressed in the return of the initial love, as instantiated in *Shir Ha-Shirim* and in Moshe’s third ascent. How can we each apply this in our own individual relationship with God?

The answer is quite simple: a person must immerse himself in the love of God and be immersed in it all his days. A person should not treat his love for and service of God as just another pursuit. He must be engaged in the love of God at all times, as the Rambam writes:

It is a well-known and clear matter that the love of God will not become attached within a person's heart until he becomes obsessed with it at all times as is fitting, leaving all things in the world except for this. This was implied by the command (*Devarim* 6:5): "[Love God, your Lord,] with all your heart and all your soul." (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:6)

This is the love that is at the core of *Shir Ha-Shirim* – a love between husband and wife that cannot be broken – and that is what we should strive for.

**Fear**

Having seen how the axis of love and mercy finds expression, it remains for us to understand how the second axis, the dread of punishment, is expressed in our lives.

The attitude of the Lithuanian *yeshivot* to Elul is reflected in sayings such as: "In Elul, even the fish in the sea tremble." Of course, this does not mean that one's service of God should be based exclusively on the fear of Divine judgment – and as a rule, “fear” in the sense of *awe* of His exalted majesty is superior to it. Nevertheless, fear of divine judgment does have a place in the service of God.

**Conclusion**

Thus, each of these axes – love and mercy, on the one hand, and fear and justice, on the other – has great importance and one must not forego either of them. It is not for naught that *Chazal* instituted the weekly Torah readings such that we would read the section of the curses in *Ki Tavo* before Rosh Hashana, expressing the axis of justice, and read *Parashat Nitzavim*, including the section on repentance, on the following Shabbat, thus giving expression to the axis of mercy: "But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it" (*Devarim* 30:14).

(This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Ki Tetze* 5780 [2020]).

1. We too rely on these two elements in our *selichot*, when we say: "Act for the sake of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov" and "Act for Your sake, if not for our sake.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:1-3 and 6:4-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)