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**

**“That He May Establish You This Day to Himself for a People”**

Summarized by Aviad Lipstadt

Translated by David Strauss

**“This Day” (“*Ha-Yom*”)**

In *Parashat Nitzavim*, on the eve of entering the land of Israel, Moshe opens his address with the following:

You are standing **this day** all of you before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water; that you should enter into the covenant of the Lord your God – and into His oath – which the Lord your God makes with you **this day**; that He may establish you **this day** to Himself for a people, and that He may be to you a God, as He spoke to you, and as He swore to Your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov. Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath; but with him that stands here with us **this day** before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us **this day**. (*Devarim* 29:9-14)

The repeated guiding word, or *leitwort*, in this passage is "this day." On the face of it, this term does not refer to a specific day, but to a perpetual commitment on the part of the people of Israel to observe the covenant *every* day.

However, Rashi's comments imply that the word "*ha-yom*" should be interpreted differently:

Another explanation: "You stand [*nitzavim*]" - Because the Israelites were now passing from one leader to another, from Moshe to Yehoshua, therefore he [Moshe] made them stand in ranks [*matzeva*]that he might address admonitions to them. Similarly did Yehoshua, and similarly did Shmuel, who said: "Now therefore take your stand [*hityatzevu*] that I may reason with you before the Lord," when they were leaving his hand and were coming under the hand of Shaul. (Rashi, *Devarim* 29:9)

Rashi explains that on that very day, the people of Israel passed from the leadership of Moshe into the hands of Yehoshua. It can be argued, then, that this is the root of the emphasis on "this day"; this is what makes that day unique.

Although we know of several cases in which leaders took leave of their communities prior to their deaths – e.g., Yaakov, Yehoshua, and Shmuel – yet it seems that there was something special about Moshe's departure, for a number of possible reasons.

**The Uniqueness of Parting from Moshe**

**I. *The Giving of the Torah***

The first unique characteristic relates to the giving of the Torah. Up until this point, Moshe in a certain sense embodied the Torah for the people of Israel. As stated in Mishna *Avot*: "Moshe received the Torah at Sinai" (*Avot* 1:1), and he taught it to the people.

Now, for the first time, the Torah is beginning to be passed down by tradition from generation to generation, as the Mishna there continues:

And he handed it down to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. (*Avot* 1:1)

Until this point, the Torah was deposited in the hands of Moshe, and was not in the possession of the entire nation; now begins the chain of tradition to Yehoshua and those who came after him. Now, the Torah becomes the collective inheritance of the people of Israel. In this sense, taking leave from Moshe was more difficult for the people than were other changes of leadership, because it marked the loss of the one who delivered the Torah to Israel.

**II. “*There Arose Not One Like Moshe*”**

 In addition to giving the Torah, Moshe played an even more unique role in his leadership of the people of Israel. Not only did Moshe receive the Torah at a one-time event, but he also acted as a mediator between the people and God on a regular basis, delivering messages from God to the people and praying to God on their behalf. When Moshe led the people in the wilderness, he also fulfilled the role of the spiritual father of the people of Israel.

Such a relationship can be very complicated. On the one hand, the people of Israel related to Moshe with special adoration and put all their trust in him. On the other hand, we see quite a number of times how the people of Israel pursued Moshe obsessively, giving him no rest. The people's "obsessive pursuit" of Moshe is well illustrated in Rashi's commentary to *Devarim*:

If Moshe went forth early from his tent, they said: Why does the son of Amram leave so early? Perhaps he is not at ease at home? If he left late, they said: What do you think? He is sitting and devising evil schemes against you, and is plotting against you. (Rashi, *Devarim* 1:12)

No matter when Moshe left his house, the people of Israel interpreted his leaving in the worst possible way! If this is only talk, the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* suggests in the context of the complaints of Korach and his company that there was an even more serious accusation against Moshe:

"And when Moshe heard it, he fell upon his face." What news did he hear? Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: That he was suspected of [adultery with] a married women, as it is stated: "They were jealous (*va-yikan’u*) of Moshe in the camp," which teaches that every person warned (*kinei*)his wife about Moshe, as it is written: "And Moshe took the tabernacle, and pitched it outside the camp." (*Sanhedrin* 110a)

But the same impossible reality described in the words of *Chazal* also has another side. As mentioned, along with the people's complaints about Moshe, Moshe also served as the spiritual father of the people of Israel, although sometimes unwillingly.

A phrase that well illustrates Moshe's attitude to the people of Israel is found in the picturesque description that he gives as part of his response to the sin of the "complainers" in *Parashat Beha’alotekha*:

Have I conceived all this people? Have I brought them forth, that You should say to me: Carry them in your bosom, as a caregiver carries the sucking child, to the land which You did swear to their fathers? (*Bamidbar* 11:12)

Even if not always of his own free will, Moshe continued to carry Israel in his bosom, "as a caregiver carries the sucking child." Time after time, Moshe was forced to protect the people of Israel. Time after time, the people sinned, and it was Moshe who prayed to God to show them mercy and not punish them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Therefore, in the wake of the dual role played by Moshe, the people of Israel were in a state of confusion during the period before Moshe took leave from them – similar to a child who knows that his father is about to leave him with no intention of returning.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Dealing with the Challenge**

To ease the difficulty of his departure, Moshe takes two steps:

First, he makes sure to change the leadership structure of the people of Israel. Already in *Parashat Pinchas*, Moshe began the process of appointing the elders, in order to remove some of the authority from his exclusive hands. This was not a localized solution, but a long process, at the end of which came the appointment of Yehoshua, Moshe's successor as leader of the people.

Second, Moshe made a covenant with each and every member of Israel. This is what happens in our *parasha*, *Parashat Nitzavim*. The covenant in *Nitzavim* is no longer only God's covenant with the entire nation, but includes each and every individual. Not only the elite, but everyone; men, women, and children, and even the wood hewers and water drawers, are included in the covenant.

Why does the covenant specifically include each and every individual? Because the covenant in *Parashat Nitzavim* transfers the service of God from the hands of Moshe to the entire nation, on a personal basis. From now on, every member of Israel has a special responsibility to take care of his future and his religious well-being – his own, and that of every other individual in Israel. Only in this way, by assuming personal responsibility, will the people of Israel be able to deal with the spiritual void that Moshe will leave behind.

In light of this, we can understand the renewed mention of free choice:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil,  in that I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances; then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land into which you go to possess it. (*Devarim* 30:15-16)

The location of this passage concerning free choice raises a rather obvious question: Why does it not appear earlier? Why was it not said together with the giving of the Torah, or together with the passage regarding fear of God in *Parashat Eikev?* To answer this, it may be suggested that free choice is connected to the covenant that the people of Israel are making with God. As long as the people of Israel lived in the shadow of Moshe, there was no place for such a passage, because when Moshe functions as the "father of Israel," he cannot yet open a window to theological and philosophical discussions. Only when the people of Israel receive religious independence – not only as a collective, but also each and every individual – only then does free choice have meaning.

**Fears About the Future**

In addition to the process of transferring the leadership to Yehoshua and addressing the difficulties that will be caused by Moshe’s departure, *Parashat Nitzavim* also deals with the new reality that will arise with Israel's entry into the land, in the framework of which two new problems may surface.

**I. *Idolatry***

The first problem is idol worship:

And you have seen their detestable things, and their idols, wood and stone, silver, and gold, which were with them. (*Devarim* 29:16)

Moshe fears that after entering the land, the people of Israel will stray after gods of silver and gold. They are liable to look for a tangible expression of God's presence, and find it in trees and stones. This concern is perfectly understandable, considering the inherent difficulty in worshiping God that stems from the lack of tangible feeling of the presence of God and the *Shekhina*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This being the case, Moshe fears that once the people seek God on their own, they will go astray and worship statues and stones. It is important to emphasize that even though idolatry seems less threatening in our times, the concern of following human lusts and desires continues to be present to this very day.

**II. *Seeking God***

In addition to the concern of idol worship, there is a concern of general indifference – that the people will become apathetic and totally abandon God. In such a reality, the people will not even bother to "seek God," but will sink into a warm and comfortable bourgeois life – even though they know that the right thing is to seek God. The underlying issue here is the gap between reason and emotion. Difficulty with faith often arises not from theological problems, but from the fact that one's emotions are not sufficiently developed, and he fails to "find God" through emotion.

To understand the solution, let us examine a different but very similar case. Many of the abstract and important concepts in our lives cannot be proven or measured, and yet we believe in them and act accordingly.[[4]](#footnote-4) We are incapable of measuring morality or love, but it is clear to us that they exist, and are even binding. It seems that a similar path must be followed regarding the problem of spiritual indifference: we must internalize that even though we are not able to prove everything with empirical tools, the commitment to God's word must remain the same.

In addition to bridging the gap between intellect and emotion that will prevent this sinking into indifference, we must also seek God in an active way and not be satisfied with blind faith. Admittedly, in Moshe's generation such seeking was relatively easy because there was a visible indication of the *Shekhina*’s presence. But even today we must not give up on this, and we must try to recognize where we can still manage to see God. Especially on the eve of Rosh Hashana, we must remember that God is near, and take advantage of this to return to Him, as stated in *Yeshayahu*:

Seek you the Lord while He may be found; call you upon Him while He is near. (*Yeshayahu* 55:6)

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Nitzavim* 5779.]

1. Moshe's prayers reach a climax after the sin of the golden calf, with the declaration that God must forgive the people's sin, "and if not, blot me, I pray you, out of Your book which You have written" (*Shemot* 32:32). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For this reason, a clear effort is made in the first chapter of the book of *Yehoshua* to establish Yehoshua's standing as Moshe's heir. Yehoshua receives an almost impossible mission – to fill Moshe’s shoes – and therefore it is important to establish his authority. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To illustrate this point, it is very difficult to understand the meaning of the verse, "The whole earth is full of His glory" (*Yeshayahu* 6:3), when one remembers that "no thought whatsoever can grasp Him" (based on *Patach Eliyahu*, from *Tikkunei Zohar*). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Descartes famously attempted to prove man's existence by way of an external proof, but failed. His conclusion was that the proof of man's existence lies in his own consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)