YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Bechukotai**

**Sicha of HarAV Aharon Lichtenstein**

**In Summation of the Book of Vayikra[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Summarized by Matan Gildai

Translated by David Strauss

There is an ancient custom among the Jewish people (less prevalent in our time) that young children begin their Torah study with the book of *Vayikra*. The common explanation offered by the *Rishonim* for this practice is "Let the pure [children] come and occupy themselves with purity [the sacrifices]” (*Midrash Vayikra Rabba* 7:3). It seems, however, that this custom has far deeper significance.

***Vayikra* vs. *Bamidbar***

The last verse in the book of *Vayikra* reads: "These are the commandments, which the Lord commanded Moshe for the children of Israel, at Mount Sinai" (*Vayikra* 27:34). Regarding this verse, *Midrash Torat Kohanim* (cited in *Yoma* 80a) states: "That no prophet is permitted to introduce any new law from then on." On the face of it, these words are puzzling, for many new *mitzvot* are added in the book of *Bamidbar*. One may also ask why this midrashic exposition was connected to the last verse in the book of *Vayikra* rather than to the last verse in the book of *Bamidbar*, which seems to have an identical meaning: "These are the commandments and the ordinances, which the Lord commanded by the hand of Moshe to the children of Israel in the plains of Moav by the Jordan at Jericho" (*Bamidbar* 36:13).

What is the difference between these verses? The last verse of *Vayikra* was stated at Mount Sinai, whereas the last verse in *Bamidbar* was stated in the plains of Moav. It would appear, however, that the difference is not merely geographical; rather, there is an essential difference between the *mitzvot* given in the book of *Vayikra* and the *mitzvot* given in the book of *Bamidbar*, just as there is a difference between the two books themselves.

The book of *Bamidbar* describes the experiences of the people of Israel on their way from Egypt to the Land of Israel, and it relates events that took place in different places and at different times. The book of *Vayikra*, however, displays a striking disregard for the dimensions of time and place and contains almost no accounts of events. The book is filled instead with *mitzvot* and guidelines, and chronologically, the book of *Bamidbar* continues directly from the end of the book of *Shemot*.

This difference relates to the content of the *mitzvot* in the two books. The commandments in the book of *Bamidbar* stem from events; they were given to address various problems that arose. The Ramban writes, in his introduction to the book of *Bamidbar*, that the commandments recorded in *Bamidbar* related to needs of the moment and that the book contains almost no *mitzvot* for future generations. The command regarding the priestly gifts was given in the wake of the rebellion of Korach and his company; the command regarding inheritance was given in the wake of the episode of the daughters of Tzelofchad; and so on. The commandments in the book of *Vayikra*, on the other hand, are mainly connected to the sacrificial service, to purity and impurity, and the like, and are not tied to needs of the moment. This is why the book of *Vayikra* ends with the words "these are the commandments," while the book of *Bamidbar* ends with the words "these are the commandments [*mitzvot*] and the ordinances [*mishpatim*]": "ordinances" are commandments that come to solve problems, commandments that "had they not been said, it would have been worthwhile saying them" (see *Yoma* 67b).

**Creating a bond**

The prophet Yirmeyahu compares the experience of the people of Israel at Mount Sinai to marriage. "Thus says the Lord: I remember for you the affection of your youth, the love of your espousals; how you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:2). In a similar vein, the Gemara in *Shabbat* (88b) compares the sin of the golden calf to a bride who was promiscuous under her wedding canopy. A historic covenant was formed at Mount Sinai between the people of Israel and God, a covenant similar to the bond of marriage.

A couple that is getting married may have many challenges and conflicting obligations, but when they stand under the bridal canopy, all the problems are forgotten. The two individuals focus on creating a bond, and push off all the difficulties and struggles to be addressed later.

In the case of God and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, the covenant is between commander and commanded. The relationship developed by way of a chain of *mitzvot*, the whole point of which was the very creation of a bond. Of course, the people of Israel knew that there would be difficulties and struggles, but while they were standing at that exciting and sublime assembly at Mount Sinai, none of those things bothered them.

The book of *Vayikra* describes the "marriage" of God and the people of Israel, and therefore we can understand that the commandments contained therein are not necessarily commandments that resolve practical problems; that is not their purpose. Even the commandments that do come to address different situations (e.g., "Love your neighbor as yourself," and the like) were given as part of the creation of the covenant, not to solve specific problems that arose.

Now we can understand the words of the *baraita* in *Torat Kohanim*: "'These are the commandments' – that no prophet is permitted to introduce any new law from then on." There would be more commandments and more enactments, but the creation of the connection was complete. The newlyweds were ready to set out on their new path.

This understanding also gives new meaning to Rashi's well-known words at the beginning of *Parashat Behar*:

What has the matter of the Sabbatical year to do with Mount Sinai, that Scripture felt compelled to expressly state where it was commanded? Were not all commandments given on Sinai? But this statement is intended to suggest the following comparison: Just as in the case of the law of the Sabbatical year, its general rules, its specific prescriptions, and its minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai, so, also, were all the commandments, with their general rules and their minute details, ordained on Mount Sinai.

Someone may come and say that the *mitzvot* that will be stated later – which are not part of the covenant between Israel and God – are less important. The Torah therefore emphasizes that this is not the case. *All* the *mitzvot* were stated at Sinai, with all their details, and they *all* form part of the "marriage contract" between the people of Israel and God.

Another question that arises is that the book of *Vayikra* should seemingly have ended with the verse: "These are the statutes and ordinances and laws, which the Lord made between Him and the children of Israel at Mount Sinai by the hand of Moshe" (26:46), which ends the discussion of the blessings and curses and thus constitutes the conclusion of the making of the covenant. After this verse, several commandments are given whose purpose and importance seem unclear, such as the *mitzvot* of valuations and dedications, and the like. It seems that this can be explained against the background of the above: Had the book of *Vayikra* ended with this verse, someone might have compared the book of *Vayikra* to the book of *Bamidbar*, seeing the *mitzvot* contained in it as guidelines for problems that would arise and not paying attention to the magnitude of what it expresses. Concluding the book with "regular" *mitzvot* illustrates the nature of the book and the standing it comes to describe.

**Where is the bond truly created?**

Turning again to the actual end of the book of *Vayikra*, it seems that the last verse is not at all accurate. Many of the commandments in the book were not in fact told to Moshe at Mount Sinai, but were conveyed in the Tent of Meeting (*Ohel Moed*); the book opens with the words: "And He called to Moshe, and the Lord spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting saying," and it seems that most of the commandments in the book were given on this occasion. There is a big difference between the Tent of Meeting and Mount Sinai: The commandments at Mount Sinai were accompanied by thunder and lightning, noise and uproar – "the earth trembled, the heavens also dropped, the clouds dropped water" (*Shoftim* 5:4; *cf.* *Tehillim* 68:9) – an impressive and horrifying assembly. This experience cannot be compared to the pastoral nature and peacefulness of the Tent of Meeting, far from the camp – "And a great and strong wind rent the mountains… but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice" (I *Melakhim* 19:11-12).

It seems, however, that despite all the differences between the two places, they have something in common. The Gemara in *Yoma* (54a) states: "Whenever Israel came up for a Festival, they would remove the curtain for them and show them the *Keruvim*, whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, and they would say to them: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman." Thus, we see that in the Tent of Meeting as well, a wedding ceremony took place between God and Israel, a state of "seclusion" and "lovemaking" of the two parties, while completely forgetting any problems or difficulties. In this respect, Mount Sinai and the Tent of Meeting are similar. The Ramban at the beginning of *Parashat Teruma* (*Shemot* 25:1) explains that "the secret of the *Mishkan* is that the glory that rested on Mount Sinai [openly] would rest on it in concealment."

These two aspects are also found in the life of every Jew. One reveals God and connects with Him even while walking down a busy street and looking at those around him, and also when he is bent over his Gemara in silence and stillness.

Now we understand the ancient custom of teaching young children specifically the book of *Vayikra.* The children follow the same path taken by the people of Israel across the generations. First, they create a relationship with God, making a covenant with Him without being bothered by the problems that are liable to arise. Only later, after they have grown up, will the children learn how to deal with the challenges that will come their way.

1. This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein on Shabbat *Parashat Behar-Bechukotai* 5753. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)