YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Geulat Yisrael**

**Rav Moshe Taragin**

**Shiur #04: Swords and Tongues**

In 1173, the Jewish community of Yemen was suffering a double challenge: a fraudulent prophet was stoking false Messianic expectations, and an Islamic fundamentalist crusade was pressuring Jews into forced conversion. The community contacted the Rambam seeking guidance and ideological support. In response, the Rambam penned a famous letter known to history as the *Iggeret Teiman*. This letter forged the fabled relationship between the Rambam and the Yemenite community.

Within the letter, the Rambam cited a verse in *Yeshayahu* 54:17 that describes the historically recurrent assaults upon the Jewish people: "weapons forged against you will fail while tongues hoisted against you in judgment will be impeached." Commenting on this dual language, the Rambam observed that throughout history, Jews have been threatened with two very different weapons. The classic assault was military and, sadly, our people have faced more than their share of these attacks. Alongside physical battering, Jews have also faced a fusillade of verbal assaults. Yeshayahu assures us that each of these assaults will fail. With this quote from Yeshayahu, the Rambam provided historical assurance to the Jews of Yemen.

The Rambam identified the "violent tongues" of the 12th century with persistent attempts to theologically debunk Judaism. In both Christian and Muslim lands, Jewish theology was ridiculed and the Talmud was vilified amidst an attempt to depict the Jews as cast-offs. God had chosen the Jews, they claimed, but the Jews had surrendered this original selection through their constant betrayals. The 13th century witnessed two famous disputations – one in Barcelona and one in Paris – in which Judaism was literally put on public trial. Often, it wasn’t politically prudent for the Jews to triumph in these "disputations," as this would unleash more persecution for the crime of winning the debate. These monkey trials proved futile, as our faith and commitment remained unassailable and we refused to buckle to the verbal flogging. During the dark period of exile, we faced the sword and the tongue and vanquished each.

Verses in Tanakh are "living organisms" and they accrue new meaning in different generations. To the Rambam, 850 years ago, the virulent tongues of Yeshayahu's prophecy referred to those who maligned our faith. In the modern context, this phrase has taken on entirely different meaning. We inhabit a secular world in which the grand theological debates of the Middle Ages seem outdated and irrelevant. To a degree, we pine for a world interested enough in religion to actively debate its terms and conditions. Sadly, these discussions no longer have currency.

In the modern context, we face a very different form of "violent tongue" – those who malign our moral behavior. Modern democracies dream of just and equitable societies – politically, economically, and socially. Though comprehensive equality often seems elusive, we all hope that with enough effort and good will, justice and equality can prevail. In our struggle to resettle our ancient homeland, the Jews have been roundly accused of immoral and "apartheid” policies. As people of conscience, it is crucial to check our policies against our moral compass and strive to eliminate any form of discrimination or inequality. However, many if not most of the claims against the Jewish state are merely modern incarnations of Yeshayahu's prophecy.

We believe that part of the Jewish message to humanity is the nobility of an ethical life. The easiest way for scoffers to belittle this message is to accuse the Jewish state of hypocrisy. If the Jewish state behaves immorally, then its message bears no impact for humanity. We are being accused of moral crimes in the Hague, in Durban, and of course in the United Nations. In many ways, nothing has changed since Barcelona and Paris. And nothing will. The weapons brandished against our people will all fail, and the tongues raised against us – in literal judgment – will themselves be denunciated. One day, humanity will gather in Yerushalayim and acknowledge a world of God, crafted by Jewish history and Jewish perseverance. Until that day, it is our honor to settle our homeland while doing our utmost to adhere to the demands of morality and conscience even as we face international hostility and opposition. One day, the world will finally notice. One day, the weapons will be disassembled and the tongues quieted. One day.