YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Shemot**

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

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With gratitude and in honor of the bar mitzvah,  
this year b'ezrat Hashem, of our twin sons,   
Michael and Joshua - Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise

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This week's shiur is dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Harold N. Rosen

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This week's shiurim are dedicated   
in memory of Mrs. Cela Meisels, Tzerka Nechama bat Shlomo,  
whose yahrzeit falls on the 14th of Tevet.

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**Individual and National Identity**

Adapted by Ari Schwab

Two questions bothered the commentators about the opening verses of *Sefer Shemot*. First, the *sefer* begins with the letter “*vav,*” meaning “and” - “*Ve-eileh shemot benei Yisrael*,” “And these are the names of the children of Yisrael.” Why does the *sefer* begin with an apparent linkage to the preceding story? Second, what is the need for this list of names in the first place? By now, we have heard about “those who descended to Egypt.” As a matter of fact, we should know not only the children but the grandchildren of Yaakov – we should remember something from two weeks ago, when this list was first given!

Let us focus on one *midrash* (*Shemot Rabba* 1:3) adapted by Rashi (1:1, s.v. *ve-eileh*):

Although the Torah enumerated them by name while they were living, it enumerates them again when it tells us of their death, thus showing how dear they were [to God], that they are compared to the stars, which God brings out and brings in by number and by name, as the verse states, “He brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name” (*Yeshayahu* 40:26).

Repeated enumeration is an expression of fondness. This is true on a personal or psychological plane, but it translates into a cosmic dimension as well.

This idea is also mentioned at the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*, a book in which *Bnei Yisrael* are counted twice – in *Parashat Bamidbar* and in *Parashat Pinchas*. There, the *midrash* notes that if someone possesses something he is concerned about, he counts it again and again. I had a stamp collection as a child, and I would count those stamps over and over, even though I knew how many there were. In the beginning, those objects are not only counted – they are mentioned by name.

The *midrash* (*Shemot Rabba* 1:2) also addresses our first question by contrasting the use of the opening word “*Ve-eileh*” with that of “*eileh*.” The latter, the *midrash* explains, refers to a break from the past. At the beginning of creation, the Torah states, “*Eileh* *toledot ha-shamayim ve-ha-aretz*,” “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth” (*Bereshit* 2:4). The term “*eileh*” is employed because creation marked a break from what came before. Creation signified the introduction of order as opposed to “*tohu va-vahu*,” “unformed and void” (1:2), a plan as opposed to chaos. In our verse, however, the term used is “*ve-eileh*,” indicating continuity; it lets us know that the seventy souls mentioned earlier were righteous, as were those who follow. Accordingly, there is nothing substantive added to our understanding, evaluation or appreciation of the twelve tribes simply by dint of relating to them, hovering over them as it were, numbering and naming them. It is simply an expression of affection.

Seforno (1:1, s.v. *eileh*)suggests a different answer. Each tribe needed to be named to single out each one’s stature, status or virtue, as opposed to subsequent generations, who assimilated or lingered in passive spirituality. Rashbam (1:1, s.v. *ve-eileh*)says that the word “*ve-eileh*” is used to contrast the initial paucity of the group with the subsequent population explosion.

**The Tribes of *Bereishit* and *Shemot***

What is the difference between *Bereshit* and *Shemot*? Broadly speaking, the first is a *sefer* about individuals and families. The families are of two kinds. Some are mentioned in lists of fathers and sons, such as the descendants of Noach, Esav and Yishmael. There is a paterfamilias and subsequently a family identity. The *avot*, however, are different. They are promised large families, but they are also individuals, and this individuality is emphasized by each one being mentioned separately, each with his own *brit* (covenant) and his own mode of *avodat Hashem* (Divine service). This is why we mention all three individually in the first *berakha* of the *shemoneh esrei*. In composing that *tefilla, Chazal* took their cue from our *parasha*; at the burning bush, God identifies himself as both “God of your forefathers” generally and as “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,” individually (*Shemot* 3:6). God did not wait for Moshe to ask, “And they shall say to me, ‘What is His name,’ what shall I tell them?” (3:13). He offered His calling card, as it were, already in their first encounter, mentioning all three patriarchs separately. There is only one God and only one genealogy of the Jewish People, but mention is made of the *avot* on two planes; *Hashem* is God of each one separately as well as collectively.

*Bereishit*, then, focuses on familial events, with tragedy, struggles and strife. We get to know each of the characters, certainly the primary ones, at one level or another.

*Shemot*, as the Ramban says in his introduction, is about community, the forging of the entity of the Jewish nation. The promise of nationhood was given to the *avot* in *Bereishit*, but *Shemot* is the story of how this was accomplished. Major components of this process are narrative, with each episode adding elements to the composite. One element of the *sefer* is the forging of national identity through the trials and tribulations in Egypt. *Chazal* describe in numerous places (e.g., Zohar, *Shir Ha-Shirim* 25b) that “they went down to Egypt for catharsis, and emerged from the purging furnace complete,” based on the reference to Egypt as “*kur* *ha-barzel*,” a furnace (*Devarim* 4:20). The exodus from Egypt added another dimension to this identity, and a further tier came with *Matan* *Torah*, when the Jewish People received the Torah. Then, as the Ramban notes at the beginning of *Teruma* (25:2, s.v. *ka’asher*),the building of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle, brought the Presence of God into the collective.

*Shemot* is a *sefer* concerned with the forging of a collective identity. That being the case, it will not do to rely on the list of names from *Parashat Vayigash*. There, the children of Yaakov are listed in terms of their personal identities, as individuals, as parts of a family unit - but nothing more. They are not the fountainheads of a community. But that is precisely what the *shevatim* (the tribes) are! This is true not only in a practical or historical sense, as they were the ancestors of the Jewish People, but in a halakhic sense as well.

The Torah describes *Matan Torah* as “*yom ha-kahal*,” “the day of the community” (*Devarim* 9:10, 10:4, 18:16). In some contexts, “*kahal*” refers to the whole of the Jewish People, embracing all the tribes. The entire nation participated in the revelation at Har Sinai. Yet there is also a sense that each tribe has a distinct identity, as is clear from halakhic contexts.

The Ramban notes at the beginning of *Parashat Shoftim* (*Devarim* 16:18, s.v. *ve-ta’am*) that judges must be appointed “*bi-she’arekha*,” “in your gates,” and “*li-shevatekha*,” “for your tribes.” Based on the *gemara*, Ramban explains that in addition to the local court required in every city, each tribe in the city must have its own court. This court has the same authority for that tribe as the high court has for all of Israel; it can establish edicts and decrees and the like. A tribe is a mini-nation. This arrangement is similar to the federal and state courts in the American judicial system.

The Ramban connects this point to another discussion. The Torah states in *Parashat* *Vayikra* (4:13-21) that if the court errs and most of the nation follows the erroneous ruling, the burden of guilt is not upon the individuals who listened, but on the court. The judges must therefore bring a sin offering. Although this is subject to a dispute between *tannaim* (*Horiot* 5a), we rule that each tribe is considered a separate unit and must bring its own sin offering in such a case. Families, subunits of the tribes, are not considered separately – they are simply part of their *shevet*.

By mentioning the tribes again at the beginning of *Sefer Shemot,* the Torah grants them a new capacity. Earlier, they were mentioned as individuals. Here, they are not individuals, the sons of Yaakov, but rather fountainheads, founding fathers; they are the beginning of what *Sefer Shemot* is all about. This is a different role historically speaking; it is a different type of life.

The *midrash* adds something that rounds out this point and simultaneously, seemingly, undermines it. Rashi quotes a verse in *Yeshayahu* (40:26) about stars: “He brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name.” The *midrash* itself cites a more familiar verse, which we recite daily in *Shacharit*: “*Moneh mispar la-kokhavim; le-kullam shemot yikra*,” “He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by their names” (*Tehillim* 147:4). According to both verses, the stars are first counted and then named. Rav Amital has often distinguished between these two aspects, between “*mispar*” and “*shemot.*” A number is a quantitative assessment that relates to each element as part of a collective. In counting, the individual can get lost. Names, on the other hand, are about forging unique identities. If there are two people in the same town with same name, some identity is lost. In fact, there are halakhic problems in such a case with regard to the giving of a *get* and with regard to loans (e.g., *Gittin* 24b and *Bava Batra* 167b).

We deal with stars as numbers, parts of a galaxy, supernovae, or whatever contexts they are involved in. But each star also has a personal identity. The juxtaposition of these two elements means that we need to speak of two identities – each person has a unique name, and each exists as a member of the Jewish People. Collective identity does not uproot personal identity, but adds to it. This is the meaning of the linking “*vav*” of “*ve-eileh*;” being a founding father does not uproot or substitute for the personal identity of the *shevet*, but adds on to it.

**Dual Identity**

This brings us back not only to the verses, but to ourselves. When are we better off - when we are learning in Alon Shevut or somewhere out there in the Diaspora? There are certain aspects of spiritual identity that can be developed in the Diaspora. Some aspects of one’s personality can be developed without regard to the Jewish past or future. These, in and of themselves, should not be dismissed; we can obtain the status of a *ben torah* in Johannesburg or New York, and this is important for the Jewish People and doubly important for the individual Jew.

Nevertheless, our fullness as Jews is obtained best, most richly and completely, in *Eretz Yisrael*, which lets us live lives as rich and full as possible in terms of *avodat Hashem*, our service of God.

The concept of dual identity is not limited to Jews. The question of division of identity concerns not only students of social history or philosophy, but those living in countries at a certain times. In the Greco-Roman world, as compared to the modern world, collective identity occupied a very central place – are you a Greek or a barbarian, and if you are a Greek – from where? But the modern world - this is the heart of liberalism – does not like collective identity, favoring instead individual predilection, orientation, self-fulfillment, etc. The difference is partly that of outlook, but it is also existential.

Broadly speaking, there are two stages – “*Sefer Bereishit*,”before national identity is formed, and post facto, when we can put the national facet aside to focus on individual growth. In between is “*Sefer Shemot*,” the time when we need to focus on collective identity.

Recent history in *Eretz Yisrael* demonstrates this process. Before the *yishuv* was settled, each person was separate; there was little of cohesiveness. What nation existed here? Others, be they Ottoman or British, were in charge. So we could focus on individual development, as indeed those in Eastern Europe or North Africa did. As things came to a head, as we envisioned a collective community and state, collectivism became very dominant. Kibbutzim were the fullest expression of this trend, but it was also expressed in other elements, such as education. As the country increasingly became perceived to be, if not self-sufficient, at least solvent, the focus on oneself at the expense of the country began its gradual ascent.

This issue faces us as *benei* *Torah*, as members of the nation, and, for many, as citizens of Israel. The important thing is to retain the linking “*vav*” – “*ve-eileh*.” A Jew must recognize that the collective and the personal are intertwined, no matter which he chooses to superimpose on the other. We do not have purely individual or collective identities. This outlook is necessary to live as an *oved Hashem*, as a servant of God; it is important not only for socio-political but also for religious purposes.

The Ba’al Ha-Tanya (*Likkutuei Torah, Parashat Re’ei*) notes that prayer must contain two elements: we must address God as individuals and as a community. Similarly, we speak of *teshuva* (repentance) of the individual and *teshuva* of the community. One little “*vav*” makes all the difference.

Let us be certain that in our lives, this “*vav*” is not diminished further; it must be part of a context that, like the yeast in dough, helps forge and mold our total identity.

[This *sicha* was delivered to overseas students at Yeshivat Har Etzion, 18 Tevet 5769.]