YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Yitro**

**guest Sicha of HarAV Ezra Bick**

**“What Shall I Do with Moshe”**

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

**Moshe’s Ascent to Mount Sinai**

A significant portion of *Parashat Yitro* deals not with the Ten Commandments, but with describing Moshe's ascent to Mount Sinai, the glory of God that rested upon it, and Moshe's descent from the mountain. At the end of this account, it is stated: "And the people stood afar off; but Moshe drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (*Shemot* 20:17), which beautifully expresses Moshe's role as an intermediary between God and Israel. To a great extent, the Torah was given to us literally through the hands of Moshe, as the following *midrash* describes:

"And Moshe went up to God" (*Shemot* 19:3) – This is what is written: "You have ascended on high, you captured what had been held captive" (*Tehillim* 68:19) – What is "You have ascended"? You ascended; you wrestled with the heavenly angels.

…Another explanation: "You ascended on high, you captured…" – according to the custom of the world, one who enters a city takes something that the people of the city do not set their eyes upon, but Moshe ascended on high and took the Torah to which the eyes of all were set. This is: "You have ascended on high, you captured what had been held captive." You might say that because he captured it, he took it for free. Therefore, the verse goes on to state: "You have taken [or: purchased] gifts for Man" – it was given to him by way of a purchase. You might say he is obligated to pay Him money. Therefore, the verse states "gifts" – it was given to him as a gift. (*Shemot Rabba* 28, 1)

Moshe ascended on high. He "took the Torah" from there, and he brought it down to the people of Israel. Even when God Himself spoke to us, it was through the intermediacy of Moshe: "Moshe spoke, and God answered him with a voice" (*Shemot* 19:19).

Moshe's role in the giving the Torah was not only a technical matter. *Chazal* teach us that even for later generations, the reading of the Torah must be by way of an intermediary, a "*shalish*" (see *Yerushalmi Megilla* 4:1). Furthermore, this is true not only for the reading of the Torah, but for Torah study in general. A person should study Torah only with a teacher. All of our study is based on tradition – each student and his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, going back to Yehoshua, who received the Torah from Moshe Rabbeinu.

**Moshe’s Descent from the Mountain**

There is, however, another dimension to Moshe’s role. Just before the giving of the Ten Commandments, we encounter a surprising account:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Go down, charge the people, lest they break through to the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish… And Moshe said to the Lord: The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You did charge us, saying: Set bounds about the mountain, and sanctify it. And the Lord said to him: Go, get you down, and you shall come up, you, and Aharon with you… So Moshe went down to the people, and told them. (*Shemot* 19:21-25)

On the face of it, this is a very strange story. The verses seem to imply that God, as it were, is looking for an "excuse" to command Moshe to go down from the mountain, and Moshe in turn tries to reject it.

This finds even sharper expression in a *midrash*:

"And Moshe reported the words of the people to the Lord" (*Shemot* 19:8) – At that time, the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give them the Torah and to speak to them, and Moshe was standing there. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: What will I do with Moshe?

Rabbi Levi said: This may be likened to a king who wanted to issue a command without his counselor. He said to him: Do such-and-such. He said to him: It has already been done. He again said to him: Go, call So-and-so a senator so that he may come with you. When he went, the king did what he wanted to do.

So the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Ten Commandments. Moshe was standing alongside Him. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I uncover for them the firmament and say: "I am the Lord your God," they will say: Who said this – the Holy One, blessed be He, or Moshe? Rather, let Moshe go down, and afterwards I will say: "I am the Lord."

So the Holy One, blessed be He said to Moshe: "Go to the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments." He said to Him: I have already sanctified them, as it is stated: "You did charge us saying." He said to him: "Go, get you down, and you shall come up, you, and Aharon with you." When Moshe went down, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself, as it is stated: "So Moshe went down to the people," and immediately afterwards: "And God spoke." (*Shemot Rabba* 28, 3)

This *midrash* not only articulates clearly what God was doing, but also explains the reason: Moshe's presence alongside God "delayed" the giving of the Torah, because the Torah had to be given directly by God, so that we not mistakenly think that there is someone else whose will must be considered. Our concern is to fulfill only God's will.

**Conclusion**

This episode, in which Moshe had to come down from the mountain so that God could give the Torah by Himself, has significance even today, as it emphasizes our commitment exclusively to the word of God.

This is true in Torah study. When we study Torah and propose an idea, there are two possibilities: Either it is the word of God that was given over at Sinai, or not. If it is fitting to be the word of God, all is well, but if not, it should be abandoned, even if it is convincing.

But the principle is not limited to Torah study; it also applies to our general conduct in life. When we must decide how to behave or what to do, there is only one consideration that should guide us – determining God's will in the situation – and no other concerns should be taken into account.

The Torah was indeed transmitted to us and continues to be transmitted by way of a messenger, but our commitment is to God alone, and to no other entity, not even Moshe Rabbeinu.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Yitro* 5781.]