YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Ki Tisa**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**On Compromise**

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**Introduction: Aharon and Chur**

*Parashat Ki Tisa* contains the story of the sin of the golden calf. This is how *Chazal* describe the course of events:

Rabbi Tanchum bar Chanilai said: This verse[[1]](#footnote-1) refers only to the story of the golden calf, as it is written: "And when Aharon saw it, he built an altar before it" (*Shemot* 32:5). What did he actually see? Rabbi Binyamin bar Yefet said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: He saw Chur lying slain before him and said [to himself]: If I do not obey them, they will now do to me as they did to Chur, and so will be fulfilled [the fear of] the prophet: "Shall priest and prophet be slain in the Sanctuary of God?" (*Eikha* 2:20), and they will never find forgiveness. Better let them worship the golden calf, for which offence they may yet find forgiveness through repentance. (*Sanhedrin* 7a)

Aharon's dilemma is quite understandable, and can be sharpened by an analogy: When a car begins to skid, the driver can try to turn the steering wheel in the opposite direction, and risk overturning, or he can turn the steering wheel in the direction of the skid, and then slowly return it to its proper position.

This principle is true not only about driving, but in other contexts as well. When you see someone doing a bad thing, you can react in one of two ways: You can choose to "go head-to-head" – to adhere to the truth and not give up for any reason – and risk total failure. Alternatively, you can choose to cooperate with the person, and later try to steer him in the right direction.

When Moshe does not come down from the mountain and the people start getting unruly, Aharon understands that if he does nothing, a civil war will break out. He decides to take measures to prevent an outbreak of fighting, and for this purpose, he is even willing to cooperate to a certain extent with the sinners.

**Should we save what is possible?**

The same question has continued to be asked throughout the generations, and we encounter it in many areas of life: Should we stick to a single truth, and see everything as black or white, or should we cooperate so that we can later bring the situation around to a better place, even if we have to pay a heavy price in the short term?

There is no definitive answer; each case must be considered individually. Sometimes it is better not to give up on even the most petty details, and sometimes it is better to resort to a compromise. And even after deciding how to behave, there will remain a cloud of uncertainty: did we behave correctly? Could more have been saved?

The hindsight question of whether we behaved properly is also not new; already with regard to Aharon, it is not clear whether he conducted himself properly. The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (6-7) indicates that *Chazal* dealt with this question, and *Rishonim* disagreed about the implications of that discussion, stemming from the question of what is meant by "*this verse* refers only to the story of the golden calf." Rashi (ad loc., s.v. *ela*) maintains that the reference is to the verse: "the avaricious [*botze'a*, which can also be understood as 'the compromiser') curse and revile the Lord" (*Tehillim* 10:3). Thus, there is no praise here, but only reproach: "that Aharon made a compromise with himself, and issued an allowance for himself." (On the other hand, in his commentary to the Torah, Rashi works to explain why the severity of the act is less than it seems.) In contrast, the *Tosafot* (ibid., s.v. *keneged*) maintain that the reference is to the verse: "True teaching was in his mouth, no sin from his lips: he walked with Me in peace and uprightness and returned many from iniquity" (*Malakhi* 2:6); they understand the Gemara to be praising Aharon's behavior.

We see similar debates over the question of what to choose in the days of the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said, "Give me Yavneh and its sages" (*Gittin* 56b), and Rabbi Akiva criticized him sharply, saying he should have asked that all of Jerusalem be saved (ibid.). Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was ready to give up Jerusalem in order not to lose everything, but the mental agony involved in this fateful decision did not escape him. Throughout his life, he wrestled with the question of whether he had acted rightly, so much so that before his death, he declared: "There are two ways before me, one leading to the Garden of Eden and the other to Gehinom, and I do not know by which I will be taken" (*Berakhot* 28b).

**Esther and the Dilemma in Shushan**

We will now turn from Aharon and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai to a question related to the month of Adar – the actions of Esther. We will begin with the Gemara’s description of her negotiations with the Sages:

Esther sent to the Sages: Write an account of me for posterity. They sent back answer: "Have I not written for you three times" (*Mishlei* 22:20) — three times and not four? [And they refused] until they found a verse written in the Torah: "Write this for a memorial in a book" (*Shemot* 17:14) [which they expounded as follows]: "Write this," namely, what is written here and in *Devarim*; "for a memorial," namely, what is written in the Prophets; "in a book," namely, what is written in the *Megilla*. (*Megilla* 7a)

Esther asks the Sages to add the book of *Esther* to the Biblical canon, and they respond that she did not innovate anything: we have already heard about the war against Amalek more than once – Yehoshua's war in the wilderness, and Shaul's war during the days of the monarchy. Therefore, ask the Sages, what added value does the book of *Esther* have for the Bible?

The answer is simple: it is not the same. The war in the wilderness was fought when Moshe accompanied the people; he sat on the mountain with raised hands, and there was a real revelation of the *Shekhina*. Later, in Shaul's war, even if there was no clear revelation of God, Shaul certainly had an army that was larger and more organized than that of the scattered and wandering Amalekites, and so it was clear that Israel would fight and not be deterred. On the other hand, in Persia, the people of Israel were living after the destruction, in exile, with God having hid His face from them. There, Amalek had risen to positions of power in the kingdom and could do what they wanted. But nevertheless, Israel fought them. This is the novel element in Esther, and that is why the Sages conceded to her and agreed with her words, "Write an account of me for posterity."

The novelty of the war against Amalek fought in Shushan also relates to what we said above about the question of compromise. Some criticize Esther for saying: "But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I would have held my peace" (*Esther* 7:4), indicating she would have been satisfied – at least in the first stage – with physical salvation from death, even at the cost of slavery. But it seems to me that we are not in a position to criticize Esther for this, and there is even some arrogance in this line of thought. Esther was faced with the same decision that Aharon faced – whether to "go for the whole pot" and risk a complete and total loss, or to cooperate and ask for a smaller rescue, with all the disadvantages involved.

Esther decided in favor of cooperation because she had no choice. Who knows whether Achashverosh would have listened to her if she had asked for complete salvation immediately in the first stage? Maybe he would have said that Haman is too important to him, that Haman is responsible for too many other things. Maybe he would have been afraid of the power that Haman had accumulated. It may be that it was precisely the addition of the intermediate option to Esther's request – "But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I would have held my peace" – that saved the Jews.

**Conclusion**

The duty to decide at times in favor of problematic compromises falls not only upon Esther, but also upon future generations. For example, if someone had tried to arrange that the Jews remain in their ghettos rather than be sent to the extermination camps, we would obviously not criticize him for that, but praise him for saving Jews from death. Leaving the Jews in their ghettos is far from the desired ideal situation, but we also need to consider what could have happened if the (problematic) compromise had not been achieved, and which certainly happened in the Holocaust.

Certainly, the ideal is that there be no ghettos, that the people of Israel not be slaves, and that the people of Israel not worship the calf. But we live not in an ideal world, but in a complex one, and thus we sometimes have to "work with what we have" in order to reach the best possible situation. These questions come up all the time; we need to learn to pay attention to the various considerations and decide in favor of one of them. This is not easy. The decisions are difficult, and sometimes we have to assume responsibility for them. According to the Midrash, Aharon himself said: "It is better that the blame be placed on me and not on Israel" (*Vayikra Rabba* 10, 3).

What can be done to improve the situation? When possible, it is very worthwhile to consult with other people, both because the consultation allows the person to sort out the various considerations for himself, and, of course, also because in this way the person may receive advice that will help him in dealing with the situation. We must take responsibility when necessary, with all the costs involved, while making a maximum effort to reach the most correct decision.

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

1. See below regarding which verse Rabbi Tanchum is referencing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)