YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Shavuot**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

**The Festival of the Giving of the Oral Law**

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**Introduction: The Blessings Over the Torah**

The Gemara in *Berakhot* discusses the formula of the blessing recited over the Torah:

What blessing is recited [before the study of the Torah]?

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: "[Blessed are You…] who has sanctified us by Your commandments, and commanded us to engage in words of Torah."

Rabbi Yochanan would conclude as follows: "Make pleasant, we beseech You, O Lord our God, the words of Your Torah in our mouth and in the mouths of Your people the house of Israel, so that we, with our offspring and the offspring of Your people the house of Israel, may all know Your name and engage in Your Torah. Blessed are You, O Lord, who teaches Torah to His people Israel."

Rav Hamnuna said: "[Blessed are You…] who has chosen us from all the nations and given us His Torah. Blessed are You, O Lord, who gives the Torah."

Rav Hamnuna said: This is the finest of the blessings.

Therefore, let us say all of them. (*Berakhot* 11b)

The Gemara implies (in Rav Hamnuna’s words) that the central message of the blessing recited over the Torah appears in its most refined form in the sentence: "Who has chosen us from all the nations and given us His Torah." In light of this, we must understand the meaning of God's choosing us and the significance of giving us the Torah.

**The Choosing of the People of Israel**

In order to understand the foundation of the choosing of the people of Israel, we must go back and examine a passage recorded a little earlier in that Gemara:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: If one rose early to study [Torah] before he had recited the *Shema*, he must recite a blessing [over the study]. But if he had already recited the *Shema*, he need not recite a blessing, because he has already exempted himself [from that requirement] by reciting [the pre-*Shema* blessing] "With abounding love [*Ahava rabba*]." (*Berakhot* 11b)

One who did not recite the blessings over the Torah, but has already recited the *Shema*, need not go back and recite those blessings, because he has already fulfilled his obligation through the blessing "With abounding love" which he recited before the *Shema.* Why is this the case?

The emphasis in the blessing "With abounding love" in the morning, and in the blessing "With everlasting love" in the evening, is on the choosing of the people of Israel – which stems from God’s love. The descendants of Avraham, who was called by God Himself "Avraham who loved Me" (*Yeshayahu* 41:8), were chosen in his wake to be loved by God.

Since the blessing of "With abounding love" is seen as a possible alternative to the blessing recited over the Torah, we see that the emphasis in the blessing over the Torah, in that "finest of the blessings," is on the giving of the Torah by virtue of God's love for us.

**The Oral Torah and Its Development**

Now that we have established the foundation of the selection of Israel, by virtue of which the Torah was given to us, we must understand what our role is, what we are required to do in practice.

*Chazal* have taught us that the Torah was given to us as a gift (*Eiruvin* 54a),[[1]](#footnote-1) and "one who gives a gift, gives with a good eye," i.e., generously (*Bava Batra* 71a). What follows from this for our purposes is that God is not interested – as it were – in "keeping the Torah for Himself"; rather, He wants it to be ours.

Let me explain. When God created the world, He gave man a role: "to work and preserve it" (*Bereishit* 2:15) – to preserve the world, on the one hand, but on the other hand, to continue developing it, and to perfect and build it in all ways.

However, in addition to the development of the world that is imposed on all of humankind, the people of Israel have another role: to develop, perfect, and build the Torah. The people of Israel received the Torah at Mount Sinai, and from there, the Torah is supposed to develop and be built.

Thus, it is only natural that the Torah of the past does not look exactly the same as the Torah of today, as the Gemara relates:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When Moshe ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moshe: Lord of the Universe, Who stays Your hand [from not doing this]? He answered: There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva ben Yosef by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws. Moshe said: Lord of the Universe, permit me to see him. He replied: Turn around. Moshe went and sat down behind eight rows [and listened to Rabbi Akiva’s discourses upon the law]. He didn’t know what they were saying and was ill at ease. When they came to a certain subject, the disciples said: Rebbi, from where do you know it? He replied: It is a law given to Moshe at Sinai – [and Moshe] was comforted. (*Menachot* 29b)

Moshe Rabbeinu "didn’t know what they were saying," and therefore, he was "ill at ease" from the encounter with Rabbi Akiva's Torah. But as soon as he realized that this was the Torah that he had received – albeit in a garb he did not recognize – he was comforted.

This is a great task that is assigned to us: to deepen the Torah and innovate new understandings of it. We must continue this task and develop, perfect, and build the Oral Law.

**The Festival of Shavuot**

So far, we have discussed the nature of the blessing recited over Torah study, and the essential connection between it and the choosing of the people of Israel. At this point, we will relate the meaning of the giving of the Torah to the festival of Shavuot.

The festival of Shavuot is known as the "festival of the giving of the Torah." But which Torah? On the face of it, this is the holiday of the giving of the Written Law, for the revelation at Mount Sinai took place on this date. However, upon further consideration, it turns out that this is actually the festival of the Oral Law.

In order to ground this assertion, we must first clarify the source for Shavuot being the festival of the giving of the Torah. After all, the Torah itself does not explicitly link the giving of the Torah to Shavuot. In the section in the book of *Vayikra* that deals with the festivals*,* the Torah states:

To the morrow after the seventh week shall you number fifty days; and you shall present a new meal-offering to the Lord. You shall bring out of your dwellings two wave-loaves… first fruits to the Lord… And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits for a wave-offering before the Lord… And you shall make proclamation on the same day; there shall be a holy convocation to you; you shall do no manner of servile work; it is a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (*Vayikra* 23:16-17, 20-21)

The Torah mentions the new meal-offering, as well as the first fruits and other sacrifices, but there is not a word about Israel receiving the Torah. This is a connection that we learn from *Chazal*; it is within their power and even their obligation to make this connection. But from where did *Chazal* derive this?

In order to answer this question, let us consider a different Talmudic passage, one that deals with the acceptance of proselytes in our time. The Gemara in *Keritot* raises the possibility that we cannot accept proselytes when there is no Temple, because the conversion process includes the bringing of an offering and sprinkling of blood. The Gemara rejects this possibility, however, with the help of a derivation from a verse:

If so, we should nowadays not receive any proselytes, since there are no sacrifices today. Rav Acha son of Yaakov said: It is written: "And if a stranger sojourn with you, or whosoever may be among you, etc." (*Keritot* 9a)

At first glance, it is not clear how these words indicate that we can accept proselytes even today. But if we read the verse in its entirety, the answer is simple:

And if a stranger sojourn with you, or whosoever may be among you, throughout your generations, and will offer an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor to the Lord; as you do, so he shall do. (*Bamidbar* 15:14)

Indeed, the words "And if a stranger sojourn… among you" do not imply that proselytes may be accepted when there is no Temple. But this can certainly be derived from the continuation of the verse: "throughout your generations." Proselytes can be accepted in every generation, even when there is no Temple, and indeed we accept proselytes even today.

*Chazal* may have understood the verses dealing with Shavuot in a similar fashion, for two reasons. First of all, all of the *mitzvot* relating to the festival of Shavuot that appear in the Torah – the new meal-offering, the first fruits, and the sacrifices – are connected to the Temple. Moreover, in the entire section dealing with the holidays, each holiday is presented with a date. The only exception is the festival of Shavuot, about which it is stated: "Also on the day of the first fruits, when you bring a new meal-offering to the Lord in your feast of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation" (*Bamidbar* 28:26). Instead of a precise date, all that is stated is that the festival is observed on the day of the offering of the new meal-offering. In light of this, there would have been room to say that the festival of Shavuot is observed only when the Temple stands.

In the next step, in order to reject this erroneous possibility, it stands to reason that here as well, *Chazal* needed a special derivation teaching that the festival continues to take place forever, even when there is no Temple and the *omer* offering is not brought. Indeed, in the account of the *omer* offering in *Parashat Emor*, the Torah states:

And you shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor fresh ears, until this very day, until you have brought the offering of your God; it is a statute forever, throughout your generations, in all your dwellings. (*Vayikra* 23:14)

It may be suggested that here too, we learn from the words "throughout your generations" that the festival is observed in all generations, even when, owing to our sins, there is no Temple and the *omer* offering is not brought.

**The Festival of the Giving of the Torah**

When the Torah states "holy convocation" [*mikra kodesh*], the phrase indicates that the holiday in question is related to a historical event that the Torah notes in the same context: On the festival of Pesach, we commemorate the exodus from Egypt, and on the festival of Sukkot, we commemorate the booths which God provided for us in the wilderness. However, when that same phrase is used in connection with Shavuot, the Torah does not specify the historical event connected to it. Here, *Chazal* enter into the picture, establishing with their wisdom – and as stated, apparently in the wake of their exposition of the verses – the historical event, and creating a connection between the festival of Shavuot and the giving of the Torah.

If so, the assertion that this is a festival marking the giving of the Written Law is itself made by way of the Oral Law, and thus in this very assertion, we celebrate the power of the Oral Law, the power of the Torah Sages.

Therefore, precisely on the festival of Shavuot, the festival of the Oral Law, which we received by way of the expositions of the Sages – precisely then, we have a special obligation to conduct ourselves like them and delve more deeply in the wellsprings of the Torah that we received as a gift from God.

Beyond delving more deeply into the Torah and perfecting it, we must turn the Torah into "a bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh," as *Chazal* have expounded:

Rava also said: At the beginning [of this verse], the Torah is assigned to the Holy One, blessed be He, but at the end, it is assigned to him [who studies it], for it is stated: "Whose desire is in the Law of the Lord, and in his [own] Law does he meditate day and night." (*Avoda Zara* 19a)

When we study and expound the Torah, it fills us and it flows through our veins. In this way, God's Torah becomes our Torah, a part of us.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Gigi on the night of Shavuot 5781.]

1. "What is that which is written: "And from the wilderness to Matana" (*Bamidbar* 21:18)? If a man allows himself to be treated as a wilderness on which everybody treads – the Torah will be given to him as a gift." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)