YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat BEHAALOTEKHA**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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Dedicated in memory of

Rabbanit Yocheved bat Todros Menos Eliyahu *z"l*

whose *yahrzeit* is the 14th of Sivan,

by her granddaughter, Vivian Singer

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**Flexibility and Moderation**

Summarized by Nadav Shultz

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

*Parashat Beha’alotekha* presents a sharp transition from high to low. The *parasha* opens with the exemplary order of the camp, in preparation for the journey to the Promised Land. The Torah describes the movement of the camp, and the festivity of the journey cannot be missed. Everything seems to be progressing towards the best possible outcome, and this is precisely what Moshe says to his father-in-law:

And Moshe said to Chovav, the son of Reuel the Midyanite, Moshe's father-in-law: We are journeying to the place of which the Lord said: I will give it to you; come with us, and we will do you good; for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel… And it shall be, if you go with us, it shall be, that whatever good the Lord shall do to us, the same will we do to you. (*Bamidbar* 10:29, 32)

The sentences "for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel" and “whatever good the Lord shall do to us, the same will we do to you" represent the mood in the camp.

But then comes an unexpected deterioration: The people begin to complain, and God's fire burns among them. Moshe is ready to submit his resignation. At the height of the crisis, tensions arise even within Moshe's family, as is evident from the incident involving Miryam's leprosy. The reason for the deterioration can be endlessly discussed; we will focus on two points.

**Eldad and Medad**

One reason for the fall may stem from a problem of leadership. Some of the most enigmatic figures in the Torah are the tribal princes of Israel. They play a leading role at the beginning of the book of *Bamidbar*:they conduct the census of the people of Israel; they play a central role in the ceremony that accompanied the erection of the *Mishkan*; and in our *parasha*, it is they who lead the journey of the camps toward the Promised Land.

However, starting in the middle of the *parasha*, we no longer find any trace of the tribal princes. Moshe claims before God that he has no one to help him. He is forced to return – according to a considerable number of *midrashim* – to the old leadership that accompanied him in Egypt. Later, the spies sent to scout the Land of Israel are also different people. What happened to the tribal princes?

It seems that the princes were the new level of leadership for the people, but it turned out that they were not right for every situation: they were fit leaders when everything ran smoothly, but when things began to get complicated, they did not know what to do. During such times of crisis, when the princes did not receive instructions from above, they fell silent and disappeared. This was directly due to the fixed nature of the princes; they did not know how to deal with situations that required dynamic and immediate responses.

Eldad and Medad stand out as the opposite phenomenon. When the elders who would assist Moshe are being appointed, the Torah says: "And Moshe went out… and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people" (*Bamidbar* 11:24). Taking the elders out of the camp in response to the people’s sin is not surprising, as we already saw Moshe act in a similar manner after the sin of the golden calf: "And it came to pass, that every one that sought the Lord went out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp" (*Shemot* 33:7).

All of the elders participated in this move – with the exception of Eldad and Medad:

But there remained two men in the camp, the name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad; and the spirit rested upon them; and they were of them that were recorded, but had not gone out to the tent; and they prophesied in the camp. (*Bamidbar* 11:26)

Eldad and Medad understood that this was not the time to stand apart from the people, but rather to be a part of them. It seems their perspective was correct, as the passage concludes:

And Moshe withdrew into the camp, he and the elders of Israel. (*Bamidbar* 11:30)

Moshe accepts the words of Eldad and Midad, and brings the elders back into the camp.

The leadership of Eldad and Medad is the opposite of the leadership of the princes. While the latter are stuck, Eldad and Medad know how to adapt themselves to the current situation of the people:

Eldad and Medad… prophesied and did not stop. (*Sanhedrin* 17a)

Unlike the other elders, the prophecy of Eldad and Medad was not temporary, because it was needed for future generations – prophecy that knows how to maintain flexibility and thus adapt itself to its recipients.

**"Like a child running away from school"**

But there is another reason for the deterioration described in our *parasha*. The Gemara relates:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: This section [*Bamidbar* 10:35-36, which is separated by inverted *nun*s] is destined to be removed from here and written in its right place. And why is it written here? In order to provide a break between the first [account of] punishment and the second [account of] punishment. What is the second [account of] punishment? "And the people were as murmurers" (ibid. 11:1). The first [account of] punishment? "And they traveled from the mountain of the Lord" (ibid. 10:33), which Rabbi Chama bar Rabbi Chanina expounded [as meaning] that they turned away from following the Lord. (*Shabbat* 116a)

The Gemara describes the journey from the mountain of the Lord as a negative thing in itself. Why? The *Tosafot* expand on this, citing another midrashic exposition:

As is said in the *Midrash* (*Yelamdenu*): “And they traveled” – that they traveled from Har Sinai, a way of three days, like a child coming out of school, who runs away and goes off; so too they ran away from Mount Sinai for three days because they learned a lot of Torah at Sinai. (*Tosafot*, *Shabbat* 116a)

What is meant by the explanation: "Because they learned a lot of Torah at Sinai"? It is possible that the people were simply tired of studying Torah: Torah study is difficult, and also requires certain actions in practice.

But there may be a more fundamental concern here. The people may have feared that the Torah would "steal" their personalities. It sometimes happens that a person who learns Torah fears that the Torah will refashion him, that it will impair his sense of autonomy over his personality. That is why the people ran away from Mount Sinai, and this is the problem that the *Tosafot* describe. The great tragedy in the story is the destination the people reach immediately following that escape: Kivrot ha-Ta'ava. Running away from the Torah ended in a painful descent into lust.

Of course, the fear is not justified. The Torah does not "steal" a person's personality. On the contrary: the Torah adds to one's personality, builds it, and upgrades it. A person should not be frightened of the effect the Torah has on his soul.

Additionally, there is a call here for every person not to "run away" from the world of the *beit midrash*, but to go out in a more moderate way. Wherever a person goes, the spirit of the Torah – the spirit of the *beit midrash* – should be reflected in his behavior.

**Conclusion**

Rav Amital liked to quote the following Gemara:

From where do we learn about a change of garments in the Torah? As it is stated: "And he shall put off his garments, and put on other garments." (*Shabbat* 114a)

The original exposition deals with "changing clothes" as part of *terumat ha-deshen*, the daily removal of ashes from the altar. However, from a conceptual point of view, this concept can be extended to all human contact with the holy. Moreover, Rabbi Soloveitchik noted that just as entering the Sanctuary is an act of *kiyum* (mitzva fulfillment), so is there also a *kiyum* in leaving it. It is of utmost importance that a person exit the Sanctuary in a moderate manner. Even when a person changes from his *beit midrash* clothing to his army uniform, the spirit of the *beit midrash* should accompany him. When a person leaves the *beit midrash*, he should continue to draw strength from his growth and development there. And of course, he is always welcome to return to the benches of the *beit midrash*, until he is called again to change his clothing.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on *Shabbat Parashat Beha’alotekha* 5779.]