YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat Shelach**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

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Dedicated in honor of the marriage of our son,
Aharon (YHE '19), to Ariella Berman
by Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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**The Eternity of the Torah**

Summarized by Itai Weiss

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction: The Sin-offering Brought for Unwitting Transgression of all the Commandments**

The *parashot* in the book of *Bamidbar* are unique in that they combine two axes: the historical and the halakhic. Narratives and halakhic sections are interwoven in this *sefer*. For this reason, *Chazal* and the Biblical commentators try to understand the nature of the connection between each story and the halakhic details that accompany it.

Sometimes this attempt raises difficulties, such as when we find the section discussing the sin-offering brought for unwitting transgression of "all the commandments" (*Bamidbar* 15:22) in *Parashat Shelach Lekha*. We would have expected to find it in the book of *Vayikra*, together with the other sin-offerings. What is the connection between this section and *Parashat Shelach*,following the story of the spies?

It is also surprising that, while all the other familiar sin-offerings come to atone for an action – for example, someone unwittingly desecrates Shabbat or unwittingly eats forbidden fats – our section deals with an unwitting violation involving a *failure* to act: "And when you shall err *and not observe*" (*Bamidbar* 15:22). What is that unintentional oversight?

*Chazal* understood the section to be dealing with inadvertent idolatry:

Now, which is the commandment that is as weighty as all the other commandments? Surely it is that concerning idolatry. (*Horayot* 8a)

That is to say, the prohibition of idolatry is as weighty as all the other commandments, and therefore, one who unwittingly practices idolatry is regarded as one who unwittingly does not observe "all these commandments" (*Bamidbar* 15:22).

**The Abravanel: Torah from Heaven**

We will return to this idea later, but let us first follow in the path of the commentators who tried to understand the plain meaning of the text. The essence of this section, and the reason it is found precisely between the story of the spies and the story of Korach, is explained by the Abravanel as follows:

And according to the plain meaning of Scripture, it seems to me that because the generation of the spies doubted the words of Moshe and the predictions of his prophecy and did not believe his words, and Korach as well raised doubts about what Moshe did, arranging God's commandments – therefore this section came in this place. Its essence is that whoever doubts about Moshe's Torah coming from heaven, if it was inadvertent, he must bring a special offering for that sin, because of his doubting whether his words from the mouth of God or not. And if it was intentional and high-handed, as with the band of the spies that was mentioned above and the company of Korach that will be mentioned below, they will be erased from the book of life and cut off from their people. This is the reason that this section is in this place, between the story of the spies and the story of Korach, and why this commandment was taught here, when the offerings to be brought by inadvertent sinners in general are recorded in the book of *Vayikra*. (Abravanel, *Bamidbar* 15:22)

According to the Abravanel, our section deals with people who think that the Torah is not from heaven. A person who willingly thinks this is cut off from the book of life, and according to his understanding, this sin was shared by the spies and the company of Korach.

The first argument, that this was the sin of Korach and his company, is very plausible. It clearly emerges from the Torah’s account that their claim was that Moshe fabricated commands and appointments on his own. The novelty in the words of the Abravanel is that this was also the root of the sin of the spies. How so?

The people of Israel themselves asked Moshe to mediate between them and God. After hearing the first two of the Ten Commandments directly from God, they said to Moshe: "Speak you with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (*Shemot* 20:16). The argument against Moshe was that once he received this free license from the people, it was no longer clear when God was speaking from Moshe's throat and when Moshe was speaking on his own initiative. Indeed, the Torah alludes to this uncertainty at the beginning of the story of the spies, as Rashi writes:

“Send you” – i.e., according to your own discretion: I do not command you, but if you wish to do so, send them. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 13:2)

According to the Abravanel, we can understand the context of the section dealing with the sin-offering brought for the "unwitting transgression of all the commandments": Both the spies and the company of Korach sinned in believing that Torah is not from heaven, and thus it is certainly appropriate that between these two stories we should find a halakhic section dealing with a person whose sin is the same.

**The Ramban: An Unwitting Apostate with Regard to the Entire Torah**

The Ramban adopts a fundamentally similar approach, in his words that are almost prophetic:

This section, according to its plain meaning, refers to the offering of one who is unwittingly an "apostate" with regard to the entire Torah, such as one who goes and becomes assimilated amongst one of the nations, and behaves as they do and does not want to be part of Israel at all. This applies if it was all done in error, such as — in the case of an individual — a child who was taken into captivity among the nations [and grew up unaware of his Jewish origin], and in the case of the community, if they [mistakenly] thought that the time of the Torah had already passed, and that it was not given for all generations. (Ramban, *Bamidbar* 15:22)

According to the Ramban, the sin referred to in this section is that of "an unwitting apostate regarding the entire Torah," something that can happen in the event that people want to adhere to the nations and not be part of Israel at all. In what situations is this possible? In the case of a child who was taken into captivity or that of a full community that thinks the Torah is no longer relevant.

Nowadays, we are indeed witness to many examples of both phenomena. Not long ago, I happened to see a woman on the news complaining that her parents didn't immigrate with her to Berlin when she was a child. I fail to understand how anyone can utter such words seventy years after what came out of Berlin for the Jewish world. There are many "children who were taken captive" in our time.

The second phenomenon also exists in our time. Many people make the mistake of thinking that the Torah is no longer relevant and that there is no reason to continue preserving this "antique."

Let's go back to the Ramban's explanation. The Ramban only explains the content of the section, not the reason for its placement specifically in our *parasha*, but his words make it possible to understand this without much difficulty: The people of Israel erred in thinking that the Torah was no longer relevant after God said to them: "Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness" (*Bamidbar* 14:29). According to some understandings, the land of Israel was divided among the members of the generation that came to the land, not among the members of the generation that left Egypt. The generation of those who left Egypt could have inferred that their covenant with God had been broken. To counter this understanding, the section dealing with the sin-offering brought for unwitting transgression of all the commandments comes to teach that the Torah is always relevant, even when Israel is in a state of sin.

**Connection to the Mitzva of *Tzitzit***

I was privileged today to notice a detail to which I had not previously paid attention, and as a result, I would like to suggest that this is precisely the function of the mitzva of *tzitzit*, another mitzva found in our *parasha*. The Torah commands as follows:

Speak to the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them *throughout their generations* fringes in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue. (*Bamidbar* 15:28)

*Tzitzit*, like the mitzvaof Shabbat (about which *Shemot* 31:16 states, "throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant"), is a perpetual mitzva: *Tzitzit* is the uniform of the servant of God, and unlike an army uniform that one removes upon completion of his service and forgets about, God's uniform is not removed, in any generation or any situation.

As a child, I was always puzzled by the following verse:

And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; that you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you use to go astray. (*Bamidbar* 15:39)

Is it really that simple? Looking, remembering, and doing? We all know that that's not the case!

To answer this, we turn to the following Gemara:

"That you may look upon it, and remember… and do" – Seeing leads to remembering, and remembering leads to doing. (*Menachot* 43b)

At first glance, this *midrash* is very puzzling: what does it add over and beyond what the verse itself says?

It seems to me that the *midrash* interrupts the automatism with which the verse can be read: seeing does not automatically lead to remembering, and remembering does not automatically lead to doing. This is an imperative, not a promise.

Indeed, the Gemara in *Menachot* tells a story about a certain yeshiva student "who was scrupulous about *tzitzit*" (*Menachot* 44a), who heard about a prostitute in one of the towns by the sea who took four hundred gold pieces for her services, and he traveled all the way there to sin with her. The Gemara does not wonder how it is that a person who is "scrupulous about *tzitzit*" is able to sin. Ultimately, he refrains from sinning when "all of a sudden, the four fringes [of his garment] strike him across the face." The decision not to sin was reached of his own free will: at first he ignored the *tzitzit*, but once he decided to see, he also decided to remember, and only then did he also decide to (not) do. This is not an automatic process, but a voluntary and conscious decision.

***Tzitzit* vs. Idolatry**

Human life is complex, convoluted, and twisted, as Yirmeyahu said: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly weak; who can know it?" (*Yirmeyahu* 17:9). We should not judge the generation of the wilderness, who sinned even though they stood at the base of Mount Sinai and received their daily bread from heaven. Nothing guarantees obeying the word of God without hard work. Indeed, the heart and the eyes are liable to lead a person astray.

This is precisely why the mitzvaof *tzitzit* is required. The *tzitzit* call upon us to put on the right glasses, the glasses of God's service, and through them to see reality and the Torah. The mistaken notions that the Torah is not for all generations, or that it is not from heaven but from the mouth of Moshe, share the same foundation: both of these thoughts ultimately stem from a lack of faith, and this may be the idea behind *Chazal's* exposition that "the sin-offering brought for the unwitting transgression of all the commandments" is the unwitting practice of idolatry.

With the glasses of the *tzitzit*,one can see that the Torah is relevant to every generation and every situation. With these glasses, one can see, remember, and do. With these glasses, one can open one's eyes wide and look at the world, even in the difficult days in which we find ourselves,[[1]](#footnote-1) and see "the master of the castle" peering out at us. Our patriarch Avraham was able to see the master of the castle, and we are commanded to follow in his footsteps and see the master of the castle with the help of our *tzitzit*.

May it be His will that by virtue of the perspective taught to us by the mitzvaof *tzitzit*, we merit what is stated at the end of the *parasha*:

That you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God. (*Bamidbar* 15:40-41)

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Shelach* 5780.]

1. This *sicha* was given during the Corona epidemic, about a month after the first lockdown. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)