YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat Nitzavim**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Repentance Out of Love**

Summarized by Doron Kavla

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**Introduction**

*Parashat Nitzavim* describes how the people of Israel will repent in the end of days:

And you shall return to the Lord your God, and hearken to His voice, according to all that I command you this day, you and your children with all your heart, and with all your soul; that then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples, where the Lord your God has scattered them. (*Devarim* 30:2-3)

A few verses later, we find another description of the great repentance that will take place in the future:

And you shall return and hearken to the voice of the Lord, and do all His commandments which I command you this day. (*Devarim* 30:8)

Why does the Torah describe the repentance a second time, just a few verses later?

It stands to reason that the repetition is not accidental, and the Torah is referring to two stages in the process of repentance, which are fundamentally different from each other. The first stage, which takes place in exile, includes repentance from idol worship. At that time, when the people of Israel repent and once again identify themselves as Jews, God will bring them back to the Land of Israel. There, they will be able to continue to the second stage – a repentance undertaken out of love, higher and truer.

The mitzvato love God is found in the Torah only in the book of *Devarim*, and precisely in the context of the Land of Israel. Only in the Land of Israel does God fulfill His promises to us, bestow upon us His blessings, and make it possible for us to serve Him truly out of love. Thus, it is here that the second stage, repentance out of love, occurs.

The distinction between two stages of repentance opens the door to a return of the kind we have seen in recent generations: a return to the Land of Israel led by secular Jews. If the first stage is about rejecting idol worship – or in our days, reclaiming Jewish identity[[1]](#footnote-1) – and a return to the Land of Israel, and only the second stage involves full repentance out of love, then there is meaning to the return to the Land of Israel even if it is led by those who do not observe the Torah and *mitzvot.*

Of course, not everyone agrees, as demonstrated by the perspectives of some members of the Charedi community regarding the return to Zion in our time. According to them, since the builders of the land and the people living there today are for the most part not Torah observant, this is not the return to Zion for which we have been waiting, but merely a chance return of part of the people of Israel to the Land of Israel.

This is not a new approach; it seems that it existed already at the time of the first return to Zion, at the beginning of the Second Temple Period.

**The First Return to Zion**

The Gemara describes how the Jews who returned from Babylon with Ezra did not have traceable genealogy, did not keep Torah and *mitzvot*, and generally speaking, were not from the upper classes of society.

Thus, the Gemara states: "Ezra did not go up from Babylon until he made it like pure sifted flour" (*Kiddushin* 69b). According to its plain meaning, the Gemara is referring to matters of genealogy; Ezra "sifted" from Babylon all those disqualified from marriage or of flawed lineage, leaving only those of distinguished lineage.

However, we see from the verses that those who went up to the Land of Israel still lagged behind those who remained in Babylon in other matters as well. They were not meticulous in their observance of Torah and *mitzvot*, and sometimes did not even know what it was that they were not observing. The verses describe how “the heads of the fathers' [houses]” discovered that the Torah contains the command: "that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month" (*Nechemya* 8:14): Not only did they not know the individual *halakhot* of Sukkot, but they did not even know about the very existence of the festival. If this was true about the leaders, it is not hard to imagine the state of affairs among the common people.

Thus, already during the time of Ezra and Nechemya those who returned to the Land of Israel were not of society's elite. It is likely that the spiritual elite of the people did not support moving to the Land of Israel, and remained in exile.

**The Disagreement Between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Zeira**

The approach that did not support returning to the Land of Israel at the time of Ezra persisted many generations later. Thus, Rav Yehuda learned from the verse "They shall be carried to Babylon, and there shall they be, until the day that I remember them, says the Lord. and bring them up and restore them to this place" (*Yirmeyahu* 27:22) that it is prohibited to move to the Land of Israel, and that "anybody who goes up from Babylon to the Land of Israel transgresses a positive commandment" (*Ketubot* 110b). Though his student, Rav Zeira, disagreed with him and moved to the Land of Israel against his wishes, Rav Yehuda himself thought it was prohibited.

The verse expounded by Rav Yehuda is taken from the book of *Yirmeyahu*, and relates to the first (Babylonian) exile. How then does Rav Yehuda, who lived after the destruction of the Second Temple, expound the verse in reference to his own time, many years later?

It seems that Rav Yehuda was of the opinion that the exile in his day, the period of the *Amoraim*, was not a new exile but a continuation of the exile of Babylon. In order to maintain such a position, one must assume that he totally ignored the events of the first return to Zion; otherwise, he would have had to see himself as living in a second exile, the exile of Rome. In his view, the first return to Zion was meaningless, presumably because it was led by people who lacked a basic understanding of Judaism and it included a Temple that was small and shabby in comparison to the First Temple (until the Temple of Herod, but that was Herod's building, not that of the entire people of Israel). Moreover, it stands to reason that in his opinion, it was decreed from the outset that the return to Zion would not succeed – as may be understood from the book of *Daniel*, which deals with the time of the redemption (for example, *Daniel* 9:21-27).

The opposition to leaving Babylon for the Land of Israel is an aspect of coming to terms with the exile. In his famous epistle, Rav Sherira Gaon describes how in the exile of "the craftsmen and the smiths" to Babylon, the exiles brought dirt and stones from the Land of Israel and used them to build the "Shaf ve-Yativ Synagogue" in the city of Neharde'a. Rav Sherira Gaon's words are exceedingly difficult, as he is essentially saying that a replacement for the Land of Israel could be found in Babylon. The truth is that this "replacement" did not last; the city of Neharde'a was destroyed at the beginning of the Amoraic period, and the Torah center moved to Pumbedita. Neharde'a tried to replace the Land of Israel, but "discovered" that it too could be replaced.

Though the attempt to "replace" the Land of Israel in the form of the city of Neharde'a was ultimately unsuccessful, the bottom line is that the attempt was made. So too during the Amoraic period, there were those who maintained that it was forbidden to go up from Babylon to the Land of Israel; they felt the "command" to remain in Babylon had not expired, since the first return to Zion had no redemptive meaning.

**The Exile of Babylon and the Exile of Rome**

Admittedly, there is room to see the Babylonian exile in a positive light, particularly in comparison to the exile that came after it. Without diminishing the wickedness of the Babylonians, or the degree of suffering and the great losses that were the lot of those exiled to Babylon, there are several ways in which the Babylonian exile was better than the Roman exile.

The most striking difference relates to the unity of the people. In the Babylonian exile, the Jews were deported to the same area, and there they continued to live together, to the extent that they had a recognized leader, the "Exilarch." The Roman exile was much worse: the Jewish people were divided into groups and factions already in the Land of Israel, and the exile only exacerbated the process, as the people spread to all corners of Europe. In Europe, the Jewish people operated more as separate communities than as an organic and connected unit like in Babylon. There was no one central authority like the Exilarch, and each community conducted its affairs independently.

It may be suggested that the distinction between the two exiles, including reference to their severity, already appears in the Bible.

To this end, it should be prefaced that sections describing the curses that will be cast upon Israel if they fail to keep the *mitzvot* are found in two places in the Torah: in *Parashat* *Bechukotai* and *Parashat* *Ki Tavo*. However, when comparing them, it is strikingly evident that whereas in *Parashat Bechukotai*,the curses end with verses of consolation, in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, no words of consolation follow the curses. Long ago, the Radbaz was asked about this surprising difference: "Why is no consolation written in the curses of *ve-haya ki tavo el ha-aretz*, as in the curses of *im bechukotai*?" (*Responsa ha-Radbaz* II, no. 769)

Among the answers offered by the Radbaz, he explains that the curses do not end in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, but continue into the first half of *Parashat Nitzavim* – which means the section dealing with repentance appears immediately afterwards and serves as the "consolation" with which the curses conclude.

While the Radbaz rejected the argument that there are no words of consolation after the curses in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, several generations before him, the Ramban distinguished between the curses in the two places. According to the Ramban (*Vayikra* 26:16), the curses in *Parashat Bechukotai* relate to the Babylonian exile, whereas "the covenant in the book of *Devarim* hints at *this* exile and at the redemption through which *we will be* redeemed from it." In other words, the curses in *Parashat Ki-Tavo* relate to the Roman exile.

The curses in *Parashat Ki-Tavo* and in the beginning of *Nitzavim* (which, as stated, the Radbaz explains constitute one continuum) are much more severe than those in *Parashat Bechukotai,* and describe greater disasters. Thus, while in *Parashat Bechukotai*,an account is given of the land being desolate, *Parashat Nitzavim* states: "And that the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and a burning that is not sown, nor produces, nor any grass grows therein, like the overthrow of Sedom and Amora, Adma and Tzevoyim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and in His wrath" (*Devarim* 29:22). Indeed, the second exile hit us much harder than the first: the people of Israel were much more persecuted, and they lived in isolation and great difficulty, certainly in comparison to the relative well-being the Jewish people enjoyed in Babylon.

**The Modern Era and the Return to the Land of Israel**

The severity of the second exile was not limited to suffering and destruction, but also found expression at the end of the exile.

In the nineteenth century, a terrible phenomenon began among the Jews in the Diaspora, of secularization and assimilation. Some people cast off the yoke of Torah and *mitzvot*, while others sought to renounce their Jewish identity and leave the Jewish people completely. In modern times, a portion of the Jewish people began to lose their identity, in a manner that, God forbid, could have led to the Jewish nation's disappearance from the world.

After many difficult years of Jews running away from their identity and many persecutions and an unbearably difficult life, the most amazing miracle in the history of the Jewish people took place: the appearance of Zionism.

From a historical point of view, this is a phenomenon that has no parallel, and is almost unbelievable: a people who suffered persecution due to their origin and customs, and only tried to run away from their identity, suddenly began to choose their identity in an active way and even to proudly broadcast it. In my view, this miracle is even greater than the miracle of the splitting of the Sea of Suf.

At this point, let us return to what we said above, about the distinction between two stages of repentance in *Parashat Nitzavim.* Zionism is the first step; it expresses choosing Jewish identity, together with the return to the Land of Israel. With this, the first stage of the process was completed, as is described in our *parasha*:

Then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples, where the Lord your God has scattered you. If any of yours that are dispersed be in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there will the Lord your God gather you, and from there will He fetch you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you above your fathers. (*Devarim* 30:3-5)

Our return to Zion is somewhat similar to the return in the days of Ezra, since it was secular Jews who initially arose and took action to return the people of Israel to their land. They accepted their Jewish identity, and essentially experienced the first stage of repentance appearing in our *parasha.* Now we are in our land, and have received anew the privilege and the obligation to love God. Now we must return to Him out of love.

**Repentance Out of Love on Rosh Hashana**

One of the most powerful *piyyutim* that is recited on Rosh Hashana (and on Yom Kippur) is *U-netaneh tokef*, which opens with the declaration: "Let us relate the power of this day's holiness, for it is mighty and frightening." Relating to the day as "mighty and frightening" is connected to God's revelation as "mighty" and "frightening." This revelation stands out in exile in general, and in the Roman exile in particular, where the Jews lived in their communities and suffered cruel and terrible persecutions, time and time again, by the nations that surrounded them from all sides.

Now, however, after we have returned to the Land of Israel, we have merited encountering, much more prominently and meaningfully, God's lovingkindness and His fulfilment of the covenant. God performs His acts of kindness for us on a daily basis; we are saved from troubles, and we constantly grow stronger. This form of providence allows us to highlight God's love and kindness toward us in how we relate to Him, and also in our prayers and *piyyutim.*

Even *U-netaneh tokef* contains expressions that emphasize God's love and mercy: At the beginning: "Your throne will be firmed with kindness," and at the end: "But repentance, prayer, and charity mitigate the severity of the decree." It is our obligation to highlight our gratitude as the focus of our repentance – especially now that, owing to God's kindness toward us, we are settled in our land and we merit so much good.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Nitzavim* 5781.]

1. While the inclination drawing us to idol worship has been cancelled (*Sanhedrin* 64a), in the modern period it has taken on a new form – the loss of Jewish identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)