YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat Ha’azinu**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**"Remember the Days of Old"**

Summarized by Itai Weiss

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

The Torah is full of things that we are obligated to remember, such as the incident of Amalek and the revelation at Mount Sinai. In *Parashat Ha'azinu*, we find an interesting reference to the very duty of remembrance:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will declare to you, your elders, and they will tell you. (*Devarim* 32:7)

Unlike other verses that mention an obligation to remember, here there is no commandment to remember a specific event, but rather a general command to remember "the days of old" – to remember history.

However, this obligation to remember does not stand alone. It is closely connected to the commandment to “write this song” (*Devarim* 31:19), which our Sages interpreted as a commandment to write the entire Torah. How so? While it is true that the explicit command in the *parasha* specifies writing the song, the song cannot be written without a context; therefore, in order to write the song, one must write the entire Torah.

Though in practice, the mitzva is to write the entire Torah, it is clear that writing the Song of *Ha'azinu* is in itself very significant. The plain meaning of the mitzvais that the Torah commands us to study history – to understand the processes that have occurred, and thus to know what is happening to us.

At first glance, it does seem important to study history, gleaning its lessons and learning to avoid the mistakes of the past, as a tool in our service of God. However, two challenges confront us when we attempt a religious study of history.

**The Difficulty of Understanding History**

The first is the difficulty of understanding the course of history. This is true with regard to uncovering the meaning of what is happening in the present, but it is also true for looking at the past; even in that framework, it is not always so easy to reach clear conclusions, if it is possible at all. History is full of events that seemed completely marginal at the time, but in hindsight turned out to be fateful. This phenomenon stems from the gradual nature of history: trends often develop gradually over the course of history, which makes it difficult to put a finger on the moment when a change occurred. For example, there is no moment to which we can point as the moment when the industrial revolution took place, because it happened slowly.

Beyond the gradual nature of history, it can be difficult to determine the correct interpretation of events even after the trends that took place have become clear. A good example of this is found in the famous passage in *Gittin*, which relates how Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai asked Vespasian to save Yavneh and her sages, and immediately afterwards brings Rabbi Akiva's harsh criticism of this decision:

Rabbi Yosef, or some say Rabbi Akiva, applied to him the verse: "[God] turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (*Yeshayahu* 44:25) – He should have said to him: Let them [the Jews] off this time. He, however, thought that so much he would not grant, and so even a little would not be saved. (*Gittin* 56b)

Rabbi Akiva, who lived in a slightly later period, read the situation differently. It is clear that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai would not have agreed with him, and it must be admitted that even today it is difficult to decide who was right.

Thus, the first challenge in studying history stems from the fact that it is difficult to understand history in itself, even before introducing a religious perspective on it.

**The Difficulty of Learning Lessons from History**

The problem of understanding the meaning of history does not stop with understanding the course of events and identifying the various trends, but relates to uncovering religious meaning as well. The Song of *Ha'azinu* was written so that the people of Israel would read it in a time of crisis and understand what led to the difficult historical moment in which they find themselves. This is an exceedingly challenging task, especially in our generation, as we will see.

Later in the song, we read:

But Yeshurun waxed fat, and kicked – you did wax fat, you did grow thick, you did become coarse – and he forsook the God who made him, and spurned the Rock of his salvation. They roused Him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations did they provoke Him. They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, gods that they knew not, new ones that came up of late, who did not stir your fathers… For a fire is kindled in My wrath, and burns to the depths of the netherworlds, and devours the earth with her produce, and sets ablaze the foundations of the mountains. I will heap evil upon them; I will spend My arrows upon them. The wasting of hunger, and the devouring of the fiery bolt, and bitter destruction; and the teeth of beasts will I send upon them, with the venom of crawling things of the dust. The sword shall bereave without, and terror within; slaying both young man and virgin, the suckling with the man of gray hairs. **I said I would make an end of them, I would make their memory cease from among men.** (*Devarim* 32:15-26)

If we try to apply this to the events of our generation – I don't think there is any verse that more closely describes what happened in the Holocaust than: "I thought I would make an end of them, I would make their memory cease from among men." Despite this, it is well known that our revered teacher, Rav Amital *zt"l*, believed that it would be a brazen display of impudence toward God to try to explain the causes of the Holocaust at a time when there is no prophet. On the other hand, Rav Yitzchak Hutner integrated the Holocaust in the framework of the succession of afflictions that the people of Israel have experienced throughout history. It is not my intention to decide this question, but it illustrates – once again – the challenge of studying history: the same events can be charged with different, even contradictory, religious meanings.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the difficulties of learning from history do not exempt us from the obligation to do so. Despite the challenge of understanding history itself in the first stage, and despite the complexity of deriving religious lessons from it, it is clear that history must be studied and that one must try to learn its lessons: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations."

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on *Shabbat Parashat Ha'azinu* 5778.]