YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat Vayera**

**Sicha of HarAV Ezra Bick**

**On *Temimut***

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**Introduction**

Let us try to understand the meaning and importance of *temimut –* innocence, simplicity, whole-heartedness. It may seem that any attempt to characterize and define what *temimut* is can only spoil it, because then we will no longer be simple. But why, then, should we still talk about *temimut*? It turns out that *temimut* is not such a simple matter.

How much is *temimut* not a simple matter? It is related about Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz that he was a *kuntz-macher*, a troublemaker, in his youth. He was once making some trouble, and the Seer of Lublin said to him: "Naftali, Naftali, the verse says: 'Be *tamim,* simple and innocent, with the Lord your God' – not clever." Rabbi Naftali replied: "In order to be simple and innocent, you have to be cunning and clever." Indeed, being innocent is not such a simple matter.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**"Be innocent with the Lord your God"**

A good introduction to understanding *temimut* is the commandment, "Be *tamim* with the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 18:13). The context of this verse is unique; it is preceded by the prohibition against being diviners, soothsayers, enchanters, or sorcerers, which is explained with the statement: "But as for you, the Lord your God does not permit you these" (*Devarim* 18:14), and immediately afterwards we are commanded: "Be *tamim* with the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 18:13).

It should be noted that one might have thought from here that the Torah's intention is that we should walk blindly in the darkness, without trying to understand what will happen in the future, and that we should simply trust in God. But immediately afterwards, it is stated: "The Lord your God will raise up another prophet like me from among your people; to him you shall listen" (*Devarim* 18:15). It is the role of the prophet to tell the future, so it is clear that there is no inherent problem with planning and looking ahead. The entire Torah is built on planning for the future; that does not indicate a problem of lack of faith. We are not expected to walk blindly in the dark.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We see then that the Torah wants us to be concerned about our future and to do so with "*temimut*." The term "*tamim*" denotes wholeness and perfection. What is this wholeness? It stands to reason that this commandment must be understood in light of the commandments that surround it. If so, the idea is that we should not turn to other factors besides God and His messengers, but rather we should be *tamim –* simple, innocent, whole, and perfect – with God.

This *temimut* can be better understood against the background of Greek tragedy. Aristotle distinguished between melodrama and tragedy in the following way: Melodrama is a sad story, but tragedy – like that of Oedipus – is a story of a person who hears that a decree has been issued from above, tries to escape his fate, and fails. The tragedy is not the fall at the end – as this was known from the beginning and all along the way – but the investment in a path that was futile. Returning to *temimut*, it can similarly be understood that being *tamim* means not trying to escape from what God has destined for us. A person must turn and listen to God and His prophets, not try roundabout routes of various fortunetellers.

**Innocence as a call to action: "Be *tamim*"**

We have succeeded in explaining a certain layer of the meaning of *temimut*. In order to deepen our understanding, let us turn back to *Parashat Lekh Lekha,* in which Avraham is commanded: "Walk before Me, and be *tamim*" (*Bereishit* 17:1).[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is very difficult to be *tamim* with God without asking questions, and in fact, Avraham does not inquire by way of the stars, nor does he even ask God, even though he is a prophet – he simply continues to move forward, seeking and advancing God’s objectives for the world.

Avraham's quiet obedience accompanies him throughout his journey. Thus, God commanded Avraham to go "to the land that I will show you" (*Bereishit* 12:1), without specifying the land in question, and he understood on his own that the reference is to the land of Canaan (*Bereishit Rabba* [ed. Theodor-Albeck], *Lekh Lekha* 39).

Not only did Avraham leave with his family "to go to the land of Canaan" (*Bereishit* 11:31) before he was commanded at all, but also after the vague command to go "the land that I will show you," he understood on his own that the reference was to the land of Canaan, to which he had initially set out. Only after the fact was this choice confirmed by God.

We encounter a similar situation in *Parashat Vayera* as well. Avraham was told to "go to the land of Moriya" (*Bereishit* 22:2), and there offer his son Yitzchak as a burnt-offering "upon one of the mountains, the one that I will show you" (ibid.), without being told which specific mountain. Here too, Avraham understood on his own that the reference was to Mount Moriya, and God indeed confirmed this after the fact (see *Bereishit* 22:14).

What is common to these examples, in which Avraham is *tamim* before God, is that Avraham performs God's service even before he is commanded to do so. "Walk before Me and be *tamim*" (*Bereishit* 17:1) is a commandment directed to one who runs before God and "paves the way" for Him. This is not a case of being simple, of gullibility or naivete; a gullible or naïve person cannot run before God and understand on his own what He wants from him.[[4]](#footnote-4) Rather, it requires profound wisdom and a deep desire.

*Temimut –* running forward even before God commands him what to do – also exacts a price: Avraham was afraid. There might seem to be a contradiction between "Be *tamim* with the Lord your God" and "Happy is the man who fears always" (*Mishlei* 28:14): someone who is *tamim* asks no questions and has no reason to be afraid. But instead, not only does *temimut* not contradict fear, but it is precisely the *tamim* who fears, *always*. It is not by chance that after the war with the four kings, God says: "Fear not, Avram" (*Bereishit* 15:1).

What did Avraham fear? *Midrash Rabba* brings several possibilities to understand what exactly caused Avraham's fear, but what is important for our purposes is that Avraham did not fear anything beforehand. At the first stage, he runs before God; he is always active, and he has no time for fear. But afterwards, when he finishes his work, he has time to think and he begins to fear – and therefore God reassures him that he has no reason to be afraid.

The same encounter with God, the same "confirmation" of what Avraham did in the course of his forward movement, also arises during his journey to the land of Canaan. In the *midrash* mentioned earlier about Avraham's choice of the land of Canaan, it is stated:

Rabbi Levi said: When Avraham was traveling through Aram Naharayim and Aram Nachor, he saw them eating and drinking and reveling. He said: "Would that my portion not be in this land." When he reached the Promontory of Tyre, he saw them engaged in weeding at the time of weeding, hoeing at the time of hoeing, and he said: "Would that my portion be in this land." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "To your descendants I will give this land" (*Bereishit* 12:7). (*Bereishit Rabba* [ed. Theodor-Albeck], *Lekh Lekha* 39)

Avraham travels through Aram Naharayim and Aram Nachor, and sees that because of the abundance, everyone is reveling, and so he declares: "Would that my portion not be in this land." Further into his journey, when he comes to the Promontory of Tyre (today's Rosh Hanikra), he sees that everyone is working the soil and doing every task in its proper season, and so he declares: "Would that my portion be in this land." Only then does God reveal Himself and say that this is the land He had in mind from the very beginning.

Thus, "Be *tamim* *with* the Lord your God" means – and this is the *peshat* (plain meaning), in my opinion, or at the very least a *derush* of truth *–* to be *tamim* and thus to work for the sake of Divine objectives. To be *tamim* and run forward, conquering the world in His name and magnifying His name in the world.

**Conclusion**

Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz explained that to be simple and innocent, one must be cunning and clever. Now we can understand the nature of this sophistication: It is easy to be *tamim* with people; but to be *tamim* with God is almost impossible.

Regarding the verse "And Avram journeyed, going on still toward the south" (*Bereishit* 12:9), the same *midrash* cited above states that Avraham "directed his attention and proceeded toward the site of the Temple" (*Bereishit Rabba* [ed. Theodor-Albeck], *Lekh Lekha* 39).[[5]](#footnote-5) This is the *temimut* of the patriarch, Avraham, and it is exceedingly sophisticated: he must decide every day where to go, each time anew.

If so, why is it still regarded as *temimut*, rather than wisdom or cleverness? Because at the end of the day, everything is quite simple. My world is full of God – before me, behind me, and to my sides – and I serve only Him; my only goal is His service. Wisdom and cleverness are found only on the path leading to that goal.

The implementation of that *temimut*, however, is not simple at all; it requires great sophistication. It is true that the command, "Be *tamim* with the Lord your God," sounds simple, but we see from Avraham, who is told: "Walk before Me and be *tamim*," that *temimut* requires subservience to God's tasks, to God's way. To be *tamim*, each person must find his own way of walking before God. My *temimut* is not your *temimut*, and vice versa. This is the sophistication of simplicity and innocence.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Bick in the context of "*Chavura be-Avoda*," on 13 Marcheshvan 5782.]

1. The author of the *Tanya* goes in the opposite direction. In *Likkutei Amarim* (18), he cites the verse: "The simpleton [*peti*] believes everything" (*Mishlei* 14:15). On the face of it, this is an insult to the simpleton, who believes everything. The *Tanya*, however, suggests a different understanding: that to believe everything, i.e., to be a believer, one must be a bit of a simpleton. It stands to reason that ultimately, he does not disagree with Rabbi Naftali that sophistication is necessary in order to be *tamim*, but he sees the way to get there in a slightly different manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this context, it should be mentioned that the Ramban (for example, in his commentary to *Devarim* 18:9) and most of the *Rishonim* understood that all of the forbidden acts of prognostication actually "work," only God forbade us to make use of them. In light of this understanding, it is clearly the prophet's role to fill in for all those people. From a different perspective, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was once asked whether it is permissible to take out a life insurance policy, or whether that would involve a problem of faith. He replied that it is unquestionably permitted, and that it certainly "does not indicate a lack of faith in God" (*Responsa Iggerot Moshe*, *Orach Chaim*, part 2, 111). Note that while we have slightly veered to a discussion about faith, it closely borders upon the discussion about *temimut*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The comparison – and to be precise, the contrast – to Noach, who "walked *et* God" (*Bereishit* 6:9), cries out for explanation, and was already noted by the commentators. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The author of the *Tanya* would apparently agree to this. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Avraham reached the land of Israel from the north, and so, from his perspective, Mount Moriya was indeed in the south. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)