YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Parashat Chayei Sara**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch Gigi**

**The Promise of the Land to the Patriarchs**

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**Introduction: The Purchase of the Makhpela Cave**

The Mishna in *Avot* (5:3) teaches that "Avraham, our father, was tested with ten trials, and he stood firm in them all." The commentators tried to identify these ten trials, with many of them pointing to *Akeidat Yitzchak* as the tenth.

According to Rabbeinu Yona, however, Avraham's tenth trial was finding a burial place for Sara: Even though God had already promised Avraham the entire land, when Avraham came to bury Sara, he had to purchase a burial plot for four hundred silver shekels (*Bereishit* 23:15). The source for Rabbeinu Yona's opinion is a Talmudic passage regarding the trials with which God tested the patriarchs and the fact that the patriarchs did not “question God's character”:

For how many times did I reveal Myself to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov… and they did not question my character…

I said to Avraham: "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it, for I will give it to you." Yet when he sought a place to bury Sara, he did not find one, but had to purchase it for four hundred silver shekels; and still he did not question my character." (*Sanhedrin* 111a).

Indeed, Avraham stood firm in the trial "and did not question God's character." But if Avraham still had to buy a burial plot for Sara, paying the full purchase price, what is the meaning of the promise that God made to the patriarchs concerning the land?

**The Connection to the Nations**

In order to understand the promise regarding the land made to Avraham, we must go back to the first command given to him. When God commanded him to "go forth" (*Bereishit* 12:1), the goal was not simply the establishment of a special nation that would live in its own land and observe laws designated just for them, but the creation of a nation that would serve as a bridge connecting all of the nations of the world to God. This idea of the universal nature of Avraham's journey arises in several places.

After relating the story of the flood, *Parashat Noach* traces the many nations of the world to the various sons of Noach, and describes how they spread out across the world. The implicit message in this account is that all of mankind is fundamentally one big family. Thus, it is clear that there is no room for the establishment of a people that will separate themselves from the rest of the nations in an absolute manner.

Similarly, note that the list of Noach’s descendants numbers seventy. This is apparently the source of *Chazal's* notion that there are "seventy nations of the world" (see, for example, *Sukka* 55a). In parallel fashion, it is emphasized in *Parashat Vayigash* that "the total number of Yaakov's family who came to Egypt was seventy" (*Bereishit* 46:27). It is very clear that this is not the precise number of those who came to Egypt, and the commentators work very hard to explain how this number was reached. Thus, we understand that the number is not by chance, but comes to teach us a lesson – that the people of Israel correspond to the nations of the world. The people of Israel are not supposed to remain in isolation, but are meant to open a conversation with the nations of the world.

Avraham Avinu was aware of the nature of his mission. From the very beginning of his journey, he “calls in the name of the Lord" (*Bereishit* 12:8, and elsewhere), in the presence of the peoples surrounding him. It is also not incidental that the command to go forth includes the blessing, "and through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed" (*Bereishit* 12:3), which relates to the blessed impact that Avraham will bring to his surroundings.

So too further down the road – precisely in the course of the commandment about circumcision, when God enters into a special covenant with Avraham that separates him from the nations of the world – He changes his name from Avram to Avraham, with the explanation: "For I have made you father [*av*]to a multitude [*hamon*]of nations" (*Bereishit* 17:5). Indeed, "Avraham the Hebrew (*ha-Ivri*)" (*Bereishit* 14:13) is called by that name because "the whole world was on one side [*ever*]and he was on the other side [*ever*]" (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Lekh Lekha* 41). Avraham was certainly separated from the nations. However, that separation was not meant to cause a disconnect, but rather a dialogue between Israel and the nations. This conversation will not come about on its own; it requires that each side take the other seriously and that they talk to each other eye to eye.

Armed with this understanding, let us go back to the question that was raised earlier: Why did Avraham have to buy the Makhpela Cave? Or, in other words, what is the meaning of the promise regarding the land? A *midrash* states:

Rabbi Yudan bar Simon said: This is one of three places that the nations of the world cannot deride Israel and say: "They are stolen [property] in your hands," and these are: the Makhpela Cave, the Temple, and Yosef's tomb. (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Vayishlach* 79)

Despite what is stated here, these three places are actually the places subject to the biggest disputes with our neighbors. What then is Rabbi Yudan bar Simon’s goal? It stands to reason that the *midrash* was well aware of controversy and conflicts over these places, and wanted to equip us with arguments and justifications regarding our rights to these places. But the words of the *midrash* are still unclear: Wasn't the entire land promised to the patriarchs? Why is it only with regard to these three places that the nations of the world cannot voice a claim against us?

It seems that the answer to this question is related to Avraham's role: Avraham must conduct a dialogue with the nations of the world, and therefore the *midrash* cares to provide justifications – to us, for the nations of the world – for our taking possession of the land. In similar fashion, Rashi, at the very beginning of his commentary to the Torah (*Bereishit* 1:1), explains that the role of the entire book of *Bereishit* and the beginning of the book of *Shemot* is to provide an explanation for the nations of the world as to why we are permitted to take the land of Israel from those who were living in it. An entire book of the Torah and more, with the sole purpose of providing us with an explanation for the nations of the world for our right to this land! Without entering into the substance of this discussion, it is clear that this choice reflects a demand that is made of us to create a dialogue with the nations of the world.

Another example of the requirement to create dialogue with the nations of the world relates to the "three oaths" that appear at the end of tractate *Ketubot* (111a), according to which the people of Israel must not go up all together to the land of Israel against the will of the nations or in the framework of a rebellion against them. What these "oaths" mean is that even the redemption, and the renewal of Israel's relationship with God following our exile, must emerge from a dialogue with the nations – with their recognition of the process and even their support.

**The Meaning of the Promise of the Land**

We have addressed the importance of dialogue with the nations of the world, but the role of the promise to Avraham is not yet clear – if in any case he had to buy a burial place, how can we understand the promise of the entire land? To answer this, one must go back and understand what exactly was included in the promise of the land to Avraham.

Regarding the verse, "A dispute broke out between Avram's herdsmen and those of Lot" (*Bereishit* 13:7), a famous *midrash* explains:

Rabbi Berekhya said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda: Avraham's animals would go out muzzled, but Lot’s animals would not go out muzzled. Avraham's herdsmen would say to them: "Has theft now been permitted?" Lot's herdsmen would say to them: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Avraham: 'To your descendants I will give this land' (*Bereishit* 12:7). Avraham is [like] a sterile mule and cannot bear children. One day he will die and Lot his nephew will inherit [from] him. We are consuming our own property." (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Lekh Lekha* 40)

Unlike Avraham's herdsmen, Lot's herdsmen let their animals graze in other people's fields. They anticipated that Lot would one day inherit the land that had been promised to Avraham, and therefore argued that they were simply "consuming from their own property."

Of course, it was Avraham's herdsmen who were right in the argument, and this is how the *midrash* continues:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: "This is what I said to him: 'To your descendants I will give [this land].' When? Only after the seven nations are uprooted from it [the land]. 'The Canaanites and the Perizites then lived in the land' – as of now, they still maintain their right to the land.” (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Lekh Lekha* 40)

Lot's herdsmen were fundamentally wrong in their understanding of the nature of the promise of the land to Avraham. They were mistaken in thinking that the land of Israel was given to Abraham as a real gift. In fact, Avraham was only given a right to the land – a future right. Moreover, the right to the land did not develop in a vacuum, but is intrinsically connected to the great task that was assigned to him – to call on the name of God in the entire world, and to be "father to a multitude of nations" (*Bereishit* 17:5), who will lead the nations of the world. In other words, more than being connected to the people of Israel's right to the land, the promise primarily assigns a great responsibility to Avraham, a responsibility that relates to the dialogue he must create with the nations.

**The Stories of the Patriarchs**

The demand made of Israel to serve as a light to the nations appears not only with Avraham, but also with the other patriarchs. Thus, after having expelled Yitzchak from Gerar, Avimelekh comes to him, together with Pikhol, the commander of his troops, and they declare: "We have seen clearly that the Lord is with you, so we say: Let there be a pact between you and us. Let us make a covenant with you" (*Bereishit* 26:28). Even at such a low point in their relationship, they recognize Yitzchak's greatness and his relationship to God – and even seek out his closeness. Yaakov behaved in a similar manner; thus, upon his return from the land of Charan, he builds an altar and calls in the name of God, as did Avraham before him, making Him known by calling the altar "God, the God of Israel" (*Bereishit* 33:20).

Before concluding, let us return to the account in our *parasha* – the purchase of the Makhpela Cave. When Avraham wishes to buy land for Sara's burial, the sons of Chet respond: "You are a prince of God in our midst" (*Bereishit* 23:6), and they offer him the choicest of their tombs. What did they have in mind? They were prepared to accept Avraham as a spiritual guide, who would lead them in every aspect of their relationship with God and their service of Him. They would be very happy for Avraham to help them bring God into their lives. However, a spiritual leader does not need to have land; they wholeheartedly offer him the choicest of their tombs, but the tomb will remain theirs. Avraham refuses to accept this, and insists on buying a field, to purchase a burial site. He wants a strong and solid connection to the land, to no longer be a guest spending the night.

This recognition goes back to what we said above, about our duty to serve as a beacon that calls out in the name of God among the nations. For that purpose, we must dialogue with them and not shut ourselves up in an ivory tower. In the wake of this perception, some have understood that just as the priests do not have land, so also the people of Israel, God's messengers to the nations, do not need a land of their own. On the contrary, they must spread themselves throughout the entire world in order to maximize their good effect on all the nations.

However, from our *parasha*, and from the explanations we have seen, a completely opposite message emerges: Avraham goes to great trouble to buy a burial plot for Sara. He does not want to remain as a wandering spiritual guide, but wishes to settle in the land. Likewise, Yaakov made an effort to purchase a plot of land near Shekhem, and David, the threshing floor of Arvana – and ultimately, God Himself promises the land to the patriarchs. The process of turning to the nations of the world and calling in the name of God must come from a clear recognition of the uniqueness of the people of Israel, and for this reason, they must have their own land.

In light of this, the focus of the promise of the land has shifted. The promise surely gives us a right to the land. However, we must realize that this right is not a free gift; rather, it is bound up with the great responsibility that rests upon us – to be a light to the nations, and to call out in God's name in the world.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Chayei Sara* 5782.]