YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT VAYESHEV**

**By the Merit of Yosef the *Tzaddik***

**I. "And Yaakov Dwelt" – By the Merit of Yosef the *Tzaddik***

Our *parasha* provides our first in-depth introduction to Yosef, the hero of the upcoming *parashot*. Yosef stands out, and apart from his brothers, already at the beginning of our *parasha*:

And Israel loved Yosef more than all his children. (*Bereishit* 37:3)

Later in the story, Yosef is the one who provides for the sons of Yaakov during a famine, thus ensuring the continuity of the people of Israel and the fulfillment of Avraham's prophecy at the covenant of the pieces:

Know with surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great substance. (*Bereishit* 15:13-14)

In this *shiur*, we will try to understand the character and role of Yosef, as seen by the *Or Ha-Chaim*, and the reason Yosef merits that role. We will see the significance of the *sefira* of *Yesod*, "foundation," which is inherently connected to Yosef and to his designation as "Yosef the *Tzaddik*” – the righteous.

**II. Yosef's Dreams**

We will begin our journey in the footsteps of Yosef at the beginning of our *parasha*,with his dreams. The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the dream of the sheaves as follows:

"For, behold, we [were binding sheaves]." In the dream, God showed him the sheaves/bundles, which represent the bundles of *mitzvot* that they would all perform together. And he showed him that his own bundle stood more upright than the others, as an allusion to his experience with the wife of Potiphar. "And also stood upright [*nitzava*]" – that he was the ruler and he stood [*nitzav*] over all of the land of Egypt. And also that all of the sheaves of the brothers were subdued and downgraded before the merit of Yosef, because it was what maintained [*davar ha-ma’amid*, lit., the thing that kept them standing] them all, and fed them and provided for them. Yosef’s intent was to inform them about this so that perhaps once they would know these things, they would remove their hate for him [from their hearts]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 37:7)

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the entire dream is interpreted in a spiritual sense, with the sheaves representing bundles of *mitzvot.* Thanks to the incident involving Potiphar's wife, Yosef merits that all the brothers would be "subdued and downgraded before the merit of Yosef," and that he would be the one to maintain them all in the wake of his mitzva that was the greatest of all.

This interpretation gives a reason and an explanation as to why Yosef was chosen to be a leader for the brothers. Amazingly, the Torah does not give any explicit explanation; on the contrary, Yosef is presented in our *parasha* as a slightly arrogant brother who brings his brothers' evil report to their father. The absence of a reason for his being chosen is grating – and the *Or Ha-Chaim* offers a direction. According to him, the incident involving Potiphar's wife is what decided that Yosef must be the next link in the chain of the formation of the nation of Israel.

In addition, of course, there is a more straightforward layer of the dream, according to which the sheaves represent the food that will be lacking in the Land of Israel, but that – thanks to Yosef – will be found in abundance in Egypt.

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* comments in other places lend even deeper meaning to his explanation here.

**III. "With All Your Heart”**

Twice a day, in the recitation of *Shema*, we mention the commandment to serve God "with all your heart." Rabbi Akiva interprets the verse as requiring one to even sacrifice his life for the service of God:

Rabbi Akiva says: "With all your soul" – even if He takes away your soul [i.e., your life]. (*Berakhot* 61b)

The Gemara, in the continuation of its discussion, testifies that Rabbi Akiva himself fulfilled this commandment:

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Shema*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, "with all your soul," [which I interpret,] "even if He takes away your soul." I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfil it? He prolonged the word "*echad*" [one] until he expired while saying it. A heavenly voice issued forth and proclaimed: Happy are you, Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word "*echad*"! (Ibid.)

Is it possible to fulfill the commandment of this verse not only in a person's death, but also in his lifetime? The commentators on the Torah offer such approaches, with a common denominator among them being the idea of serving God not through actions, but with feelings and thoughts. The Ibn Ezra, for instance, writes that the heart is "the mind":

"With all your heart and all your soul" – the heart refers to the mind (*da’at*). It is another term for the spirit of intelligence, because it is its first residence. And similarly: "wise-hearted" (*Shemot* 36:6); "he that gets a heart [=knowledge]" (*Mishlei* 19:8). (Ibn Ezra, *Devarim* 6:5)

According to the Ibn Ezra, God commands that our thoughts and ideas always be devoted to the service of God.

Alternatively, the Ramban places the emphasis not on one's thoughts, but on his desires:

"With all your heart" – In the opinion of the Midrash (*Sifrei Vaetchanan* 6), the heart mentioned here is the power of desire, similar to the expressions: "You have given him his heart's desire" (*Tehillim* 21:3); "Lust not after her beauty in your heart" (*Mishlei* 6:25). If so, "with all your soul" denotes the intellectual [capacity of the] soul. Similarly, "yet the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life" (I *Shmuel* 28:29). (Ramban, *Devarim* 6:5)

According to this interpretation, the commandment here is to reject our desire for the sake of God.

According to these two interpretations, what we have here is a deepening of commitment and love for God. Love comes first and foremost through actions, but the deeper and truer it is, the more it penetrates into the realms of thought, desire, and emotion as well. When a person loves someone, he is willing to set aside his own desires for the desires of his beloved. This is also what is expected of a Jew in the nation of Israel – to put aside his own desires for the sake of God. First and foremost, on the practical side: to refrain from forbidden acts even when one wants to perform them. But beyond that, there is also a deeper aspect, as is stated in the Mishna in tractate *Avot*:

Do His will as [you would do] your own will. (*Avot* 2:4)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* expands this idea even further, suggesting that all the commands in the verse, "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" refer to the same point – overcoming one's will for the sake of God.

There are three dimensions to this overcoming:

Our verse also alludes to three levels that encompass the boundaries of love. One corresponds to the emotions, namely, the desires of the heart. One corresponds to need, which is food that sustains a person. And one regarding the amount – what extent is necessary in order to fulfill the obligation of love [vis-a-vis God]. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 6:6)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* points to two concessions that a person makes in his life for the sake of God. First, he gives up his basic needs. A person does not eat everything, nor does he perform all types of labor at all times, even though these are actions that are necessary for his daily existence. The other concession relates to the desires of his heart – the same desires of which the Ramban spoke.

It seems that we are dealing here with two different types of significant concessions. One relates to a person's needs; by making concessions in this area, the person shows that he places his trust in God and relies upon Him to provide whatever he requires. The second relates to a person's desires; by making concessions here, the person shows God that He is his greatest desire.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* specifies that the words "with all your heart" correspond to the latter – to overcoming desires:

Corresponding to the realm of emotion, it says: "with all your heart." Even when a person lusts for food or wealth, the desire is not so intense that the person cannot control his spirit and easily refrain from it. This is not the case when his heart fills with heartfelt desire and he desires a beautiful woman, even to the point that the feeling affects him so much that he cannot control his spirit and incline his heart, and it would force him to do what he does not want to do. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The reference here is to a situation in which a person almost gives in to his desires, and gives them up only for the sake of God. The *Or Ha-Chaim* continues with the best example of this:

Go out and see how hard even the righteous Yosef had to work to suppress the urge in his heart in the incident involving Potiphar's wife, as is attested by the reward he received for his effort. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Yosef demonstrates the most distinctive fulfillment of "with all your heart": In a situation where he was asked to commit an offense that nobody would ever learn of, he remained faithful to his tradition, to “the image of his father,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and first and foremost to God. Yosef had plenty of good excuses to deny these things, including the feeling that God did not seem to have accompanied him or brought him any closer to the realization of his dreams, but just the opposite. He also had grounds to think his father was party to the conspiracy to sell him together with his brothers, as it was he who had sent him to them. Still, Yosef does not rebel but manages to withstand one of the toughest trials.

Thus, Yosef is granted the title of "righteous" for his ability to love God with all his heart.

**IV. A *Tzaddik* is the Foundation of the World**

The fear of the wicked, it shall come upon him; and the desire of the righteous shall be granted. When the whirlwind passes, the wicked is no more; but a righteous man is the foundation of the world. (*Mishlei* 10:24-25)

The concept of *tzaddik yesod olam*,a righteous man who is the foundation of the world, is likely familiar. But why exactly is a righteous man referred to by that designation? What makes him the foundation of the world?

In *Bereishit Rabba*,this verse is expounded as relating to Noach:

"These are the generations of Noach; Noach was a man righteous and whole-hearted in his generations" (*Bereishit* 6:9). This is what is written: "When the whirlwind passes, the wicked is no more; but the righteous is the foundation of the world." "When the whirlwind passes, the wicked is no more" – this is the generation of the flood. "But the righteous is the foundation of the world" – this is Noach. (*Bereishit Rabba* 30, 1)

It is clear why Noach is the foundation of the world, since he saved his family and animals from the flood, and also rose up and founded a new world after the flood. In a certain sense, the righteous Yosef did the same thing for the children of Israel: He saved them from hunger, and then made possible their continued existence in Egypt. But how is this connected to his righteousness?

We will try to understand this by examining the well-known words of the *Or Ha-Chaim*,in his commentary to *Parashat Bereishit*,concerning the essence of Shabbat:

"For on it He rested." We must understand what the Torah had in mind with these words. It seems right to explain, based on what we wrote above, that the world lacked permanent existence until Shabbat arrived and the world stood. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bereishit* 2:3)

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, resting from work is not the only dimension of Shabbat; in fact, it is by virtue of the day of Shabbat that the entire world exists. Based on this understanding, the *Or Ha-Chaim* resolves a serious difficulty:

Based on this interpretation, we can understand the statement of *Chazal*: "Whoever sanctifies Shabbat and says: 'And the heaven and earth were finished,'becomes a partner to the Holy One, blessed be He, in the creation of the universe" (*Shabbat* 119b). On the face of it, their words are far-fetched and forced. Who ever heard of man becoming a retroactive partner in God's handiwork, something that He had long since completed? And furthermore, what is this great act through which one reaches such an achievement? (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Indeed, how can one become a partner to something that has already been completed?

According to my explanation, the Sages speak the truth, and the word of God is in their mouths. In view of the fact that Shabbat secures the world's existence for the six days following it, after which another Shabbat comes and gives the world life and secures its existence for another six days – and you must know that the existence of Shabbat in the world is its observance, for if Shabbat is not observed, there is no Shabbat… therefore, whoever sanctifies Shabbat becomes a partner in the creation, that is to say, by fulfilling and observing the sanctity of Shabbat, there is Shabbat, and because there is Shabbat, the world exists. Thus you see that he causes the world to exist, and there is no greater partner in creation than this. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Man's partnership with the Creator of the world finds expression in the fact that the whole world was created for the sake of one day – a day that exists only by virtue of the people of Israel. Observance of Shabbat is what animates the world and gives it the ability to operate; therefore, whoever observes Shabbat becomes a partner in the perpetual existence of the world.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* continues and attests that throughout the generations, there has always been a *tzaddik* (righteous man) who has kept Shabbat, and that *tzaddik* is designated as "the foundation of the world":

You must know that ever since God created man, the world has never lacked a maintainer [*davar ha-ma'amid*] – a *tzaddik* who is the foundation of the world, who preserves Shabbat. Adam kept Shabbat, and after him his son Shet, for he was a totally righteous man, and many righteous people after him. Whenever one *tzaddik* died, God had already arranged for another to be born, a chain continuing though Metushelach, Noach, Shem, Avraham, etc. And from there, the observance of Shabbat among the people of Israel did not cease; even in Egypt they observed Shabbat, as *Chazal* have said (*Shemot Rabba* 1). This is right. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

If so, "the righteous man who is the foundation of the world" is the one who, through the observance of Shabbat, secures the continued existence of the world.

Let us take a moment to delve a little deeper: Why is it specifically observance of Shabbat that sustains the world? Rabbi S. R. Hirsch gives a wonderful explanation of the prohibition of work on Shabbat that illuminates the root of this idea:

Six days shall you do your work, serving God and His world, and the seventh day is cessation of work to your God. On this seventh day you cease your work, to pay homage ever anew to God, to express ever anew that every future breath you draw, as well as every future swing of the pendulum of the world's clock, belongs to God, who is your God, from whom you get every particle of the world that you attain, and who expects every ounce of your powers to be used in His service. (Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, *Shemot* 20:10)

Resting from work on Shabbat comes to teach us that every breath a person draws in the world is for the glory of God. The proof of this lies in the ability to stop one's regular work for the sake of God. Essentially, observance of Shabbat radiates on all our actions and turns them into heavenly works. From this, it is easy to understand why a righteous person who observes Shabbat is the foundation of the world – because the world was established for the service of God, and one who keeps Shabbat testifies that all his actions, every day, are for the service of God.

**V. The Attribute of Foundation in Yosef**

A keen eye may have noticed that the concept of a "maintainer" [*davar ha-ma'amid*] appears in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* both with regard to the righteous man, who keeps Shabbat and thus maintains the world, and with regard to Yosef, who maintained the children of Israel. The connection between Yosef and the righteous man who keeps Shabbat is explained more clearly in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* elsewhere:

"And you shall keep My Sabbaths." This is in accordance with what the *Zohar* writes (II, 277; III, 301), that the seven days of the week were allocated to seven righteous men. According to the *Zohar Chadash* (at the beginning of *Parashat Toldot*), Shabbat was allocated to Yosef, who represents the mystical dimension of peace. This is the reason we greet each other with the greeting "*Shabbat Shalom*," and the reason that we rephrase the conclusion of the *Hashkiveinu* blessing on Friday nights by adding the words "who spreads over us the tabernacle of Your peace, etc." This is the attribute of the foundation of everything. Yosef acquired this attribute when, owing to his righteousness, he safeguarded the sign of the holy covenant from approaching impurity. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 19:3)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* draws a connection between Yosef's standing up to temptation, and his special connection to Shabbat. This type of absolute love for God – that manages to overcome worldly desires and stand strong, even in a place where no one would know if he stumbled – has the power to maintain the entire world.

Yosef is not the only one who followed in Yaakov's path, but he is the thread that connects the family of Yaakov and the perpetuation of that path. He is the link in the chain that ensures the next stage in Avraham's prophecy about the establishment of the Jewish people. The choice of Yosef to serve as this link stemmed from his ability to overcome the greatest worldly desires for the sake of God. A love so fundamental and deeply rooted is worthy of maintaining Israel on its foundation.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See Rashi on *Bereishit* 39:11, based on *Sota* 36b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)