YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT VAERA**

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**Dedicated in memory of**

**Albert W. and Evelyn G. Bloom z"l,**

**on their Shvat yahrzeits,**

**parents who taught in word and deed**

**"And I will take you as my nation, and I will be your God." (Shemot 6:7)**

**by Shanen and Akiva Werber,**

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**The Hosts of the Children of Israel**

**I. The Lord of Hosts**

But Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I will lay My hand upon Egypt, and bring forth My hosts [*tzivotai*], My people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt, by great judgments. (*Shemot* 7:4)

The term *tzava*, army or “host,”is used many times in connection with the people of Israel in the context of the exodus from Egypt (*Shemot* 6:26; 7:4; 12:17, 41, and 51), including, as in the above verse, specifically referring to them as *His* hosts. In this week's *shiur*,we will try to understand the term “hosts” both in relation to Israel and in relation to God.

The designation "*Hashem Tze-va'ot*," "the Lord of hosts," appears many times in Tanakh in reference to God. It is used for the first time in the book of *Shmuel*,regarding Elkana’s travels to sacrifice to God:

And this man went up out of his city from year to year to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts in Shilo. (I *Shmuel* 1:3)

This is also how Chana refers to God in her prayer (I *Shmuel* 1:11), and the designation is used frequently after that. As stated, however, it does not appear at all in the Torah.

According to the simple understanding, this term is one of the names of God. In fact, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 6:2) regards "*Tze-va'ot*" as one of the Divine names that may not be erased. Among the *Tannaim*, however, the question whether or not "*Tze-va'ot*"has sanctity is subject to dispute:

The Holy One, blessed be He, is called by ten names of praise. These are: the name *Alef-Dalet*, *Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh*, *E-lohim*, *E-lo’a*, *E-lohekha*, *E-loheikhem*, *E-l*, *E-heyeh*, *Sha-dai*, *Tze-va'ot*. Rabbi Yose says: I disagree about *Tzeva'ot*, as it is stated: "Captains of hosts shall be appointed at the head of the people" (*Devarim* 20:9). (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, chap. 38)

In tractate *Shevu’ot*, Rabbi Yose's opinion is explained in greater detail, and the verse from our *parasha* is brought as proof for his position:

Our Sages taught: If he wrote *alef lamed* of *E-lohim*, [or] *yod heh* of the Tetragrammaton, they may not be erased; *shin dalet* of *Sha-dai*, *alef dalet* of *A-donai*, *tzadi bet* of *Tze-va'ot*, they may be erased. Rabbi Yose said: The whole word *Tzeva'ot* may be erased, because *Tzeva'ot* refers only to Israel, as it is stated: "And I will bring forth My hosts, My people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt." (*Shevu'ot* 35b)

According to Rabbi Yose, the term "*Tzeva'ot*" is not one of God's names; rather, it comes to connect God to a certain group – i.e., Israel – that is called "*Tzeva'ot*." Therefore, in his view, this designation has no sanctity.

Others, however, argue that the group in question is the hosts of heaven. This is implied by the Gemara in *Berakhot*:

"And she vowed a vow and said: O Lord of *Tze-va'ot*" (I *Shmuel* 1:11). Rabbi Elazar said: From the day that God created His world, there was no one who called the Holy One, blessed be He, *Tze-va'ot* [hosts] until Chana came and called Him *Tze-va'ot*. Chana said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe, of all the hosts and hosts that You have created in Your world, is it so hard in Your eyes to give me one son? (*Berakhot* 31b)

This is also the understanding of Rabbi Moshe Cordevero in his *Pardes Rimonim*:

The name *Tze-va'ot* indicates that He is master of the hosts above, and it is derived from the phrase "host of heaven." (*Pardes Rimonim* 19, 1)

If so, it is possible that even though the word "*Tzeva'ot*" refers to a certain group, it may still have sanctity – for part of God's greatness and praise is when we say that He rules over the entire host of heaven.

When it comes to practical *halakha*, the authorities disagree. The Gemara in *Shevu'ot* seems to decides in favor of the Sages:

Shmuel said: The *halakha* is **not** in accordance with Rabbi Yose. (*Shevu'ot* 35b)

This is also the Rambam's position in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 6:2. But some *Rishonim* had a different reading of the Gemara. Thus, for example, the *Eshkol* distinguishes between cases in which the word "*Tzeva'ot*" is in a construct state and cases in which it appears as part of the Divine name itself:

It is written in the *Halakhot*: Rabbi Yose says: The whole word *Tzeva'ot* may be erased. Shmuel said: The *halakha* **is** in accordance with Rabbi Yose. We have learned by tradition from the great ones of the world: Shmuel said: The *halakha* is **not** in accordance with Rabbi Yose. And the early Rabbis explained: Wherever it is stated *Hashem Tze-va'ot*, *E-lohim Tze-va'ot*, it may not be erased. But where it is written *Hashem E-lohei ha-Tzeva'ot,* this is Israel, and *Tzeva'ot* may be erased. (*Sefer Ha-Eshkol*, *Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 63a)

This opinion can also be derived from the Aramaic translation which renders *E-lohei Tzeva'ot* (*Tehillim* 89:9) as "God over all the soldiers of heaven," but the phrase *E-lohim Tze-va'ot* it does not translate at all.

It is possible to go deeper into the meaning of the name *Tze-va'ot*, assuming that it is indeed a name with sanctity. Thus far, we have seen that it is possible that it refers to the hosts of Israel and it is possible that it refers to the hosts of heaven. But we can also find several other interpretations in the words of *Chazal*:

*Tze-va'ot* – He is the host over all His hosts… *Tze-va'ot* – that all the *mitzvot* are in Him. (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 38)

The first interpretation there also appears in tractate *Chagiga*:

Reish Lakish said: "The Lord of hosts is His name" (*Yeshayahu* 48:2) – He is the Lord among His host. (*Chagiga* 16a)

We also find an interpretation of the name *Tze-va'ot* in *Midrash Shemot Rabba*:

When I wage war against the wicked, I am called *Tze-va'ot*. (*Shemot Rabba* 3, 6)

Thus, there are many interpretations that see this name as expressing praise of God. In light of this, it seems that the basis of the disagreement between Rabbi Yose and the Sages is clear: Does the word *Tze-va'ot* relate to the powers of God, or to the creatures that He governs (whether humans or ministering angels)?

**II. The Hosts of the Children of Israel**

As noted above, the term "*tzava*" appears several times in the book of *Shemot* in the context of the people of Israel coming out of Egypt, but the first time this *tzava* is associated with God is in the verse mentioned at the beginning of the *shiur* (*Shemot* 7:4). In this verse, God commands Moshe and Aharon how to speak before Pharaoh, warning them from the outset that Pharaoh will not listen to them but stating that nevertheless, God will take His host out of Egypt.

There are several ways to understand why God uses this specific expression to describe the people of Israel in the context of leaving Egypt. The Alshikh references the fact that the expression "hosts of the Lord" relates sometimes to Israel and sometimes to the angels, in order to explain its place in the Israelites' exodus from Egypt:

And there is a second reason, namely, that it says "according to their hosts," that is to say, that the exodus was not only of Israel, but also of the hosts of the Lord. And furthermore, when He takes them out with their hosts, the heavenly entourage who are the hosts of the Lord should think as if they were the hosts of Israel, and bear them on their wings. This is what it says: "according to their hosts" (*al tziv’otam*, *Shemot* 6:26) – on them literally, as it is stated: "And I bore you on eagles' wings" (ibid.19:4). (Alshikh, *Shemot* 6:26)

A close reading of the text indicates that in most places, the term "hosts" appears in the context of Israel's descent into Egypt or their exodus from it. The Alshikh explains that the people of Israel did not leave Egypt by themselves, but together with the hosts of heaven.

This statement can be taken in several directions. It is possible to explain that both the exile in Egypt and the redemption were not only about physical exile for the people of Israel, but were also for the hosts of heaven.

Alternatively, we can explain it based on the *Or Ha-Chaim’s* explanation of the secret of the Egyptian exile, while also answering the question of why the redemption from Egypt and the plagues took so long:

This puts my mind to rest regarding the question of why God dragged out the plagues that afflicted Egypt for twelve months. For among *Chazal*, there are some who say that each plague lasted for three weeks and the warning lasted a week, while others say the opposite.Why did God delay the redemption? He should have brought the plagues one after the other and redeemed them immediately, and a warning of one day or one hour should have sufficed, like the warning that is given to a Jew, which need not be dragged out over time, and all the more so in the case of the nations of the world…  
Also, why did not one warning suffice for all the plagues?

Rather, because the time for the redemption had not yet come, God sated them with bitterness in the meantime, until the time for the redemption arrived. And then He redeemed them immediately with no delay.

You might ask: What would have been the problem for God to redeem them before that time? Furthermore, why did God take them out at the last minute, at a time that if they delayed a little, they would have been stuck there, to the point that they had to hurry and they couldn't tarry? He should have taken them out when there was ample time.

In view of our premise that the principal purpose of the exile in Egypt was to clarify the sparks that became lost in the fifty gates of impurity… This puts the mind to rest regarding the two questions, for had He taken them out earlier, they would have lost the clarification of that part… (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 3:8)

Based on the words of the *Or Ha*-*Chaim*, it may be suggested that the sparks of holiness are part of the host of heaven that went up from Egypt with the people of Israel.

Another possible reason for calling the Israelites "the host of the Lord" in the context of the exodus from Egypt could be connected to the reason for which the Israelites are taken out of Egypt. Already at the burning bush, when God appoints Moshe to the great mission of taking the people of Israel out of the darkness of exile, God gives him the following sign:

When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain. (*Shemot* 3:12)

There is a purpose toward which the people of Israel are directed and for the sake of which they are taken out Egypt: to move from serving Pharaoh to serving God. That is, to be the host of the Lord.

**III. Who is Really the Host of the Lord?**

We have seen that the expression "the host of the Lord" appears in the context of the exodus from Egypt. On the simple level, this is a non-sacred context, for the designation "host" as relating to God appears only in the books of the Prophets. If so, the "host" in the book of *Shemot* is the people of Israel, or perhaps also the host of heaven.

The verse with we opened the discussion gives rise to a minor linguistic problem:

But Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I will lay My hand upon Egypt, and bring forth My hosts [***et*** *tzivotai*], My people [***et*** *ami*]the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt, by great judgments. (*Shemot* 7:4)

The second instance of the word "*et*"seems to be superfluous, and could have been omitted. This brought the *Or Ha-Chaim* to shed light on an important point regarding the question of who is the host of the Lord:

"And I will bring forth My hosts, My people." We must know, who are these hosts? If they are Israel, it should have said "[And I will bring forth] the hosts of My people, the children of Israel [*et tzeva’ot ami Bnei Yisrael*]." Perhaps God means to record in the Torah our exaggerated stature before Him, for He has no other special hosts like Israel, and therefore had He said "the hosts of My people," there would have been room to say that God has many hosts, the Israelites being one of them. Therefore, it says "My hosts," without further qualification, to say, those listed. And afterwards it says who this is: "My people the children of Israel.” The verse is explained in the manner of generalization followed by specification, the generalization "My hosts" including only the specification, "the children of Israel." Therefore, only the elevated and superior Israelites are referred to as "the hosts of the Lord." (*Or Ha-Chaim* 7:4)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* does not write here explicitly that he means to exclude the heavenly angels from being called "the hosts of the Lord," but he emphasizes the unique role of the people of Israel as the hosts of the Lord.

If this is indeed how God relates to us, we must examine what this role obliges us to do in return.

The word "*tzava*" can be interpreted in several ways.

Without a doubt, the word is first and foremost connected to war, with the host in the war being a particular people or a person. Soldiers have a defined mission, a goal and a task that they must fulfill and for the noble value of which they are even prepared to sacrifice their lives. The only host that can act on behalf of God in this physical world is the people of Israel. In contrast to the host of heaven, who are standing, the people of Israel are called "walkers," as they can advance from one level to the next (based on *Zekharya* 3:7). There is a well-known *midrash* about Moshe:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moshe ascended on high, the ministering angels spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe! What business has one born of woman among us? He said to them: He has come to receive the Torah. They said to him: That secret treasure, which has been hidden by You for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created, You wish to give to flesh and blood?…

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Give them an answer!...

He [then] spoke before Him: Master of the Universe! The Torah which You give me, what is written in it? "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt." He said to them [the angels]: Did you go down to Egypt; were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why then should the Torah be yours? Again, what is written in it? "You shall have no other gods." Do you dwell among peoples that engage in idol worship? Again, what is written in it? "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." Do you perform work, that you need to rest? Again, what is written in it? "You shall not take [*tisa*] [the name… in vain.] Are there any business [*masa*] dealings among you? Again, what is written in it? "Honor your father and your mother." Have you fathers and mothers? Again, what is written in it? "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal." Is there jealousy among you; is the Evil Inclination among you? Straightway they conceded to the Holy One, blessed be He, for it is [ultimately] stated: "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name, etc." (*Tehillim* 8:10), whereas "Who has set your glory upon the heavens" is not written [in this verse, though it is included in the identical verse in 8:2].

Immediately each one was moved to love him [Moshe] and transmitted something to him, for it is stated: "You have ascended on high, you have taken spoils [the Torah]; you have received gifts on account of man" (*Tehillim* 68:19); as a recompense for their calling you man [*adam*], you did receive gifts.

The Angel of Death too confided his secret to him, for it is stated: "And he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people" (*Bamidbar* 16:47); and it is stated: "And he stood between the dead and the living, etc." (*Bamidbar* 16:48). Had he not told it to him, from where would he have known it? (*Shabbat* 88b-89a)

The end of the *midrash* emphasizes that after Moshe taught the host of heaven that only human beings can serve as God's host on earth and spread His name and make a dwelling place for Him in the lower world – the host of heaven as well joined this mission. Everyone gives gifts to Moshe, so that the Israelites will succeed in their mission.

The word "*tzava*" refers to a large group, not to individuals; in other words, to something whole, not to a part. Thus, God created the heaven and the earth in their fullness, and this is the meaning of "and all their host" (*Bereishit* 2:1), namely, they were finished and ready.

The Israelites were not fit to be called "*tzava*" while they were individuals, patriarchs and families – until they turned into a people in Egypt. This is how the *Or Ha-Chaim* elsewhere explains the delay in receiving the Torah. The Torah states, “These are the travels of the children of Israel, who went out from the land of Egypt *by their hosts*” (*Bamidbar* 33:1), and the *Or Ha-Chaim* writes:

You find that *Chazal* said (*Bereishit Rabba* 71, *Mekhilta Yitro*) that the reason God did not give the Torah to the early ones is that they did not have the fullness of a host, so that the *Shekhina*,which is called *Tze-va'ot*,would rest upon them. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bamidbar* 33:1)

Hegoes on to explain that only when the people of Israel are counted together as a whole is the *Shekhina* with them:

The words "by their hosts" allude to the resting of the *Shekhina* on them. Thus there is here mention of the holy nation and mention of the number of the whole and the resting of the *Shekhina*. (*Or Ha-Chaim*,ibid.)

We find in many places that the unity of Israel is necessary for the resting of the *Shekhina*, which is why the Temple was destroyed (*Yoma* 9b, and elsewhere). Just as in the army, all wear the same uniforms, respect one another, and belong to one group, thus must we view ourselves, the entire people of Israel, as a single unit.

We have touched upon two roles that God has assigned to us, because of which only we, the people of Israel, who live in this physical world, can be the host of the Lord – the mission planted within us to spread His *Shekhina*, and the unity that is the basis for this.

(Translated by David Strauss)