YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**PARASHAT BO**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch Weintraub**

**"This Month Shall Be to You"**

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**Introduction**

The Jewish people did not emerge as a nation in the Land of Israel, but in the land of Egypt. The Torah describes two births of the people. One is a physical birth, at the beginning of the book of *Shemot*:

And he said to his people: Behold, the people [*am*] of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. (*Shemot* 1:9)

This is the moment of the physical birth of the people. The first time the Israelites are referred to as a people, an *am*, is here, in the words of Pharaoh – and it will happen many more times in the history of the people of Israel that it is precisely an outsider who defines them as a people. Whenever the Israelites see themselves as twelve separate tribes, different classes or parties, there comes someone on the outside who says: "As far as I am concerned, you are all the same." By doing so, that person redefines the Israelites as one people, just as Pharaoh did in his day.

There is, however, also a second birth of the people, which appears in our *parasha*:

And the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt, saying: This month shall be to you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you.

Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: On the tenth day of this month, they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their father's household, a lamb for a household. (*Shemot* 12:1-3)

Here we discover a spiritual birth, through the commands that are conveyed to the people. Just as children at the age of *bar* or *bat mitzva* reach spiritual maturity mainly through the duties they are now required to fulfill, so too at the spiritual birth of the nation: in order to create a mature nation, commandments and duties had to be imposed on the people.

**Sanctification of the Month and the Role of a Calendar**

We understand then, the general role of the commandments given to the people at their spiritual birth – *kiddush ha-chodesh* (sanctification of the month) and the *korban pesach* (paschal sacrifice). However, it is not clear why these specific *mitzvot* were chosen to establish the nation of Israel; what is so special about these two commandments?

We can explain the mitzvaof *kiddush ha-chodesh* based on a simple principle, though that principle is not explicitly stated in the Torah: In order for a nation to emerge from under the shadow of another nation, it must establish a culture of its own. The commandment to sanctify the months creates a new calendar – a lunar one, unlike the solar calendar used in Egypt. This calendar enables the beginning of a new culture for the people of Israel, helping them separate themselves from the culture of Egypt.

But what about the *korban pesach*? How does that help establish the newborn nation of Israel?

**The Paschal Sacrifice and the Memory of the Exodus**

The idea behind the *korban pesach* is presented already in the Torah:

And it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying: What is this? that you shall say to him: By strength of hand, the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage. (*Shemot* 13:14)

We see here that the purpose of the *korban pesach* is to create a certain historical consciousness. The Torah is not satisfied with the miracle of the exodus itself; it wants to preserve the connection to that miracle for future generations as well.

Why does the Torah attach so much value to preserving the historical message of the exodus (whether through the *korban pesach* or through other means)? It is possible to offer several explanations for this.

The first relates to knowledge of God. When God revealed Himself to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, He chose to present Himself as follows:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. (*Shemot* 20:2-3)

The historical consciousness of the exodus from Egypt is an important layer in the people's knowledge of God, leading them to thank God for His goodness and to observe His commandments with greater commitment.

The second explanation does not focus on the knowledge of God, but rather on the "knowledge of the people." Among most of the nations of the world, people tell stories that glorify and magnify their past. Not so with the people of Israel. The nation the Torah wishes to establish is no more worthy than others based on its lineage, for it is nothing but descendants of slaves. Its virtue derives not from its past, but from its actions in the present.

A third explanation of the significance of the Paschal offering lies in the language in which the entire exodus from Egypt is described. A close look at the story of the exodus found in *viddui ma'asrot* (the declaration recited at the conclusion of the tithing cycle) reveals an emphasis on God’s role in the liberation and nation-building – "And *the Lord heard* our voice, *and saw* our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression; and *the Lord took us out* … and *the Lord brought us* to this place" (*Devarim* 26:7-9). It is not the nation that creates itself, but rather God who creates the nation. Thus, it follows that the continued existence of the people depends not only on them but mainly upon God, and they should always maintain an awareness of this dependence.

**The Paschal Sacrifice and Opposition to Slavery**

Another lesson can be derived from the *korban pesach*, and for this we must preface with a discussion of an essential dispute regarding the reasons for the commandments, between the Rambam, on the one hand, and Rav S. R. Hirsch and Rav A. Y. Kook, on the other. In the second half of the third part of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam explains the reasons for *mitzvot*.Most of these reasons, in his view, are rooted in the past, with many *mitzvot* designed to negate the opinions of idol worshippers.

Rav Hirsch and Rav Kook were not prepared to accept this type of understanding and instead followed the path of the Ramban, who also disagreed with the Rambam, arguing that it is impossible that the *mitzvot* depend on events that took place in the past, with no relevant meaning for the present or the future. In his view, there must be existential messages for man, throughout the generations, in the *mitzvot*.

Rav Hirsch introduced the concept of understanding *mitzvot* as symbols, while Rav Kook created the concept of "windows for light" – namely, that the *mitzvot* point us in the direction of ultimate ideals. For example, Rav Kook explains the prohibition of cooking meat and milk together by saying that the very use of animal products is not ideal. Therefore, even though in consideration of the state of the world, there is no prohibition against using animal products, the Torah still imposes certain restrictions, including the prohibition of mixing meat and milk. This is meant to serve as a reminder to man that ultimately, the ideal situation is a world in which man does not harm animals for his personal benefit at all.

If we adopt Rav Kook's view, we must look for the messages behind the commemoration of the exodus from Egypt. Where does the Torah want us to go from the memory of the exodus? There are many possible approaches to this question, but we will focus on only two of them.

First: hatred of slavery. The Torah's intense hatred of slavery stems from the notion that one should serve God alone, not serve other human beings. "A servant of God – he alone is free."

This idea is not just theoretical or attitudinal; it is codified in numerous *halakhot*, such as the law governing a day-worker who wishes to withdraw in the middle of the day from the agreement he had made with his employer, without any plausible reason. In the past, it was common for a person who breaks a contract to be punished for doing so, to the point of imprisonment. However, the *Shulchan Arukh* rules in this case:

If a worker began to work, and withdrew in the middle of the day, he may do so… as it is stated: "For to Me the children of Israel are servants" (*Vayikra* 25:55) – and not servants of servants. (*Shulchan Arukh* CM, *Hilkhot Sekhirut Po'alim* 333:3)

A worker can withdraw from an agreement even in the middle of the day. If he thereby caused damage to the employer, he is of course required to compensate him for it, as is anyone who causes damage. However, no punishment is imposed upon him for the very breach of contract. The Torah's abhorrence of the institution of slavery leads it to permit the breaching of a contract in order to ensure that a person's time will always be left in his control – so that he will not become enslaved to another person.

The second message that can be identified is identification with the weak. Generally speaking, people tend to be attracted to others who share their social status. Thus, those of higher status sometimes end up being completely alienated from members of the lower classes in society. The Torah wants to develop in man a social awareness and sensitivity for every member of the nation, both the strong and the weak.

The *mitzvot* for the generations in our *parasha* strengthen our historical consciousness in relation to God and the people, the internalization of the origins and eternity of the people of Israel, the opposition to slavery, and identification with the downtrodden. In this way, the continuing consciousness of the exodus from Egypt contributes to building the personality of the entire nation of Israel as a collective, and of each member of that nation as an individual.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Rav Baruch Weintraub on *Shabbat* *Parashat Bo* 5779.]