YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**PARASHAT YITRO**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**"Now I Know That the Lord is Great"**

Summarized by Yair Oster

Translated by David Strauss

It has been taught: On that day, Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. He said to them: If the *halakha* agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it! … Again, he said to them: If the *halakha* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven! Thereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halakha* agrees with him! But Rabbi Yehoshua arose and exclaimed: It is not in heaven. What did he mean by this? Rabbi Yirmeyahu said: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai: "After the majority must one incline" (*Shemot* 23:2). (*Bava Metzia* 59b)

This famous passage is part of the story concerning the oven of Akhnai and describes a fundamental disagreement between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. According to Rabbi Eliezer, *halakha* is determined by Heaven, whereas according to Rabbi Yehoshua, *halakha* is an earthly system entrusted to human beings.

It seems that this dispute can easily be linked to another dispute between the same *Tannaim*, in connection to the opening verse of our *parasha*:

Now Yitro, the priest of Midyan, Moshe's father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moshe, and for Israel His people, that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. (*Shemot* 18:1)

"Now Yitro, the priest of Midyan, heard." What news did he hear, that he came and converted? Rabbi Yehoshua said: He heard of the battle with the Amalekites, since this is immediately preceded by: "And Yehoshua weakened Amalek and his people with the sword" (*Shemot* 17:13)… Rabbi Eliezer said: He heard about the splitting of the Sea of Suf, and came, as it is stated: "And it came to pass, when all the kings of the Amorites heard" (*Yehoshua* 5:1). (*Zevachim* 116a)

According to Rabbi Yehoshua, the news that brought Yitro was regarding the war against the Amalekites. In contrast, Rabbi Eliezer maintains that the news was about the splitting of the Sea of Suf. As stated, it stands to reason that the root of the dispute is the same as that of the dispute cited above. Here too, Rabbi Yehoshua maintains that the greater miracle, the one that would be more likely to inspire a gentile to cleave to God, is one connected to an earthly event like the war against the Amalekites, not a miracle like the splitting of the Sea of Suf. In this context, it should be noted that the war against the Amalekites also involved a miracle, as the "hands of Moshe" played a significant role, but that was far from the battle itself, which was fought by human warriors from the people of Israel. In contrast, the splitting of the Sea of Suf involved no earthly dimension whatsoever. Rabbi Eliezer, however, believes exactly the opposite: the more visible and unusual the miracle, the more impressive it is, and the more it sanctifies the name of God among the nations. If we want to use code names, we can ask what is more impressive: the supernatural miracles of Pesach, or the natural miracles of Chanuka and Purim, which involved actual wars?

On the face of it, Rabbi Eliezer's opinion is much more understandable. The truth seems to be that the more impressive and the less natural the miracle, the more admiration it creates. Rabbi Yehoshua would probably argue that while the effect of God's clear intervention is stronger, it is only short-term. If you want to create a long-term change in position, it is preferable to keep the level of Divine intervention low. It can perhaps be argued that one approach characterizes the national-religious community and the other the ultra-orthodox community. In any event, both approaches are valid, and it is not my intention to decide between the two.

In this context, it is worth noting a *midrash* that, on the face of it, presents a puzzling approach:

Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon said: Yitro was recorded in Amalek's list of commanders, and once they fell, he came and converted. (*Midrash Shmuel* 12)

These are remarkable words. We are accustomed to perceiving Yitro as a positive character; why does this *midrash* portray him in negative terms, as a commander in the evil Amaleki army? Two explanations can be suggested:

1. In I *Shmuel* 15, we find an association between Yitro's tribe, the Kenites, and Amalek: "And Shaul said to the Kenites: Go, depart, get you down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt. So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites" (I *Shmuel* 15:6). That is to say, Scripture itself describes some degree of connection between Yitro (and his descendants) and Amalek.

2. The beginning of our *parasha* is very puzzling: it says Tzipora and the two children of Moshe arrived together with Yitro, but the Torah had earlier described them joining Moshe on the way from Midyan to Egypt. What happened in the meantime? This *midrash* may be hinting at a painful split between Moshe and Tzipora, which led her to return to her father’s house. In his anger at his son-in-law, perhaps Yitro was tempted for a time to join Moshe's enemies, but eventually they reconciled.

Apart from this difficulty, however, there remains another problem in the *midrash*, namely: Is it really possible to imagine the commander of an army that was defeated in battle joining the victorious army, those who were his enemies until a few moments ago? This seems to be a wild idea, that does not match our impression of reality!

**In Those Days in This Time**

Beginning shortly after the Balfour Declaration, Britain's attitude towards the Jews began to deteriorate. This is reflected in many cases that we will not go into at this time; we will suffice with Britain's renunciation of the original declaration that had granted the Jews the east bank of the Jordan as well, the many immigration ships that in the best case were turned around near the shores of Israel, and in the worst case were sunk at sea, the signing of the White Paper that drastically limited the number of Jews who were permitted to immigrate, and the like.

We will focus on one famous battle. In Tevet 5709, Operation Chorev took place. I will not go into the various details of the operation, but will merely mention that the events unfolded in such a way that at some point, British planes attacked Israeli forces. Israeli planes, which were very old compared to the British planes, were sent out to protect the Israeli forces. Those planes were flown by young and inexperienced pilots, led by Ezer Weizmann. In the end, not a single Israeli plane was hit, while five British planes were downed. This was a huge humiliation for the British Kingdom. Shortly after that event, Winston Churchill delivered a speech in the British Parliament, in which he said:

The coming into being of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel is an event in world history to be viewed in the perspective not of the generation or the century, but in the perspective of a thousand, two thousand or even three thousand years.

That is to say, we see that the statement of Rabbi Yehuda ben Simon can indeed reflect historical reality. Even a leader of a defeated army is capable of supporting the winning side, even shortly after the victory.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on *Parashat Yitro* 5777.]