YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT TZAV**

**Clarifying the Sparks, By Way of the Torah**

**I. Introduction**

This is the law [*torah*] for the burnt-offering, for the meal-offering, and for the sin-offering, and for the guilt-offering, and for the consecration-offering, and for the sacrifice of peace-offerings. (*Vayikra* 7:37)

Reish Lakish expounded this verse as follows:

Reish Lakish said: What is [the meaning of] what is written: "This is the law [*torah*] for the burnt-offering, for the meal-offering, and for the sin-offering, and for the guilt-offering"? It teaches that whoever occupies himself with the study of Torah, it is as if he offered a burnt-offering, a meal-offering, a sin-offering, and a guilt-offering. (*Menachot* 110a)

Reish Lakish teaches us that Torah study is equal in value to the sacrificial service – a message that is especially important nowadays, when we lack the sacrificial service.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the deeper meaning of Reish Lakish's exposition, based on an amazing question. Reish Lakish claims that whoever studies Torah is deemed as if he brought a burnt-offering, a meal-offering, a sin-offering, and a peace-offering.[[1]](#footnote-1) These sacrifices are all different from each other in their natures and purposes – a sin-offering atones for sin; a peace-offering can be brought as an expression of gratitude; a meal-offering comes from the plant world, whereas the rest of the offerings are animals; etc. How and in what way can Torah study substitute for such different sacrifices?

**II. Torah elevates the sparks**

 The *Or Ha-Chaim* prefaces his comments with a short introduction dealing with the kabbalistic concept of clarification of sparks. I will try to explain this a bit before we see his words. In kabbalistic thought, the concept of "sparks" alludes to elements of holiness that are scattered across the world. These elements of holiness are often attached to material things in our world, and part of Israel's role in the world is to clarify (or, perhaps, refine or filter) the sparks of holiness from the material world to which they have adhered. The *Or Ha-Chaim* divides the sparks of holiness into two categories:

I will first preface with the words of our Rabbis, men of truth… who said that the purpose of Torah study is to clarify the sparks of holiness that have fallen and [as a result] have been forcibly removed from holiness, and to return them in complete unity to the way they were. And there are two aspects [of fallen sparks of holiness]:

1) One refers to the sparks of holiness which descended into the world of chaos for a reason known to Him. The term ["sparks" of holiness] is enough for students of *Kabbala* to know what we are talking about.[[2]](#footnote-2)

2) The second refers to souls which have been oppressed by that man of *Belial* [an apparent reference to Samael] ever since Adam’s sin, which provided the negative elements in our world with a great deal of spiritual loot... (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 7:37)

The first type are sparks that descended into the world as part of its creation, for a reason known to those who are familiar with *Kabbala*. The second type are sparks that the *Sitra Achra* (the other side, i.e., the side of impurity) "gathers" in the world from the sins of different people, especially the sin of the first man, Adam.

The second point innovated by the *Or Ha-Chaim* here, which will be the focus of this *shiur*, is the way Israel raises the sparks back to their source:

The only way such souls can be rescued from the clutches of the spiritually negative forces which hold them captive is the study of Torah in such a way that Torah becomes the mainstay of our lives. This will elevate the sparks of holiness that fell prior to the existence of the world of repair, and will remove from the mouth of Samael that which he swallowed... This is what our Rabbis, of blessed memory, stated (*Kiddushin* 30b): "If he assails you, [lead him to the *beit midrash*]: if he is of stone, he will dissolve; if iron, he will shatter]."

Torah has the capability to separate something primary from what is secondary to it; thus, it has the power to remove sparks that are attached anywhere. Elevating the sparks is a very central element in the *Or Ha-Chaim's* teachings. He expresses in several places in his commentary that, to a certain extent, he sees this as the purpose of the people of Israel.

This is how the *Or Ha-Chaim* understands Israel's time in Egypt:

Another intended meaning, when God says: "I have surely seen [*ra'o ra'iti*]” (*Shemot* 3:7), is that He saw two things: First, that **the clarification of the sparks of holiness had been completed** and they no longer had any benefit in the exile. As the Rabbis, of blessed memory, stated: "'And they despoiled [*vayenatzlu*] Egypt' (*Shemot* 12:36) – … they made it like a trap [*metzuda*] without grain…[or] like the depths [*metzula*] without fish (*Berakhot* 9b; *Pesachim* 119). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 3:7)

In *Parashat Masei*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* portrays Israel's journeys in the wilderness as aimed at elevating sparks of holiness:

Indeed, it will be explained according to the words of the men of truth (*Zohar* part II, 157a) that **Israel's wanderings in the wilderness were meant to clarify the sparks of holiness** taken captive by the man of Belial who was camped in the desolate wilderness, for there he acquired his place, a place of snakes and scorpions. The congregation of God passed through there to remove from his mouth what he had swallowed. This is why Israel camped in one place for a year and in another place for twelve hours – for it was in accordance with what was necessary for clarifying the sparks that were in that place. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bamidbar* 33:1)

In *Parashat Behaalotekha*, heexplains that this was the role of the Ark of the Covenant in Israel's journeys:

And the verse, "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward" (*Bamidbar* 10:35), comes to teach that when the ark sets forward, all the **sparks of holiness** adhere to it, and when the sparks of holiness are clarified, they explode and the husks are shattered. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bamidbar* 10:35)

This is also how the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains, in *Parashat Balak*, the meaning of the exiles that Israel experiences:

It seems to me, based on the introduction from the words of the *Zohar*, that the reason for Israel's exiles is **to clarify the sparks of holiness** set among the inhabitants of those lands. (*Bamidbar* 24:23)

The principle that it is Torah that clarifies the sparks also appears many times in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim*. Based on what he writes in other places, we will try to better understand *how* the Torah clarifies those sparks.

One of the sources the *Or Ha-Chaim* brings in support of this principle is from *Parashat Bechukotai*, where the Torah states:

If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them… And you will pursue your enemies, and they will fall before you by the sword. (*Vayikra* 26:3-7).

According to the simple understanding of these words, the reward for keeping the *mitzvot* is victory in battle. However, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that in the wake of observing the *mitzvot*, Israel will succeed in the task of clarifying the sparks:

The verse, "And you will pursue your enemies," refers to the hidden spiritual action achieved through involvement with the Torah. Know that the purpose of studying the Torah and performing its commandments with vigor is to clarify the sparks of holiness and join its branches to each other. This has been prevented by the hold of the [negative forces of the] husks, as it is stated: "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God" (*Yeshayahu* 59:2). See also what I explained in *Parashat Yitro* on the verse: "You shall be My own treasure" (*Shemot* 19:5). The husks are attributed by the designation haters and enemies. See [also] what I explained regarding the verse: "For Your enemies, O Lord" (*Tehillim* 92:10)… Here the Torah makes known that through involvement with Torah and *mitzvot*, they will pursue the “enemies” and they will collapse and impurity will be defeated. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 26:7)

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, we are not dealing here with a "reward" for observing the *mitzvot*; rather, the clarification of sparks is a direct result of studying Torah and keeping the *mitzvot*. Here, he reveals that this is the "spiritual action" of the Torah, but still does not explain *how* Torah study does this.

In *Parashat Yitro*, in discussing why the people of Israel are a "treasure" to God from among all the nations, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that it is by virtue of their ability to clarify the sparks. He makes use there of an interesting analogy, which can help teach us a bit regarding how the Torah works to clarify the sparks:

It further alludes to what we saw previously, that the branches of holiness are scattered throughout the world, and they can only be clarified by way of Israel, and especially through involvement with the Torah, which is like a magnet that draws these sparks of holiness from wherever they are. These sparks of holiness themselves are also called a "treasure." (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 19:5)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* compares the Torah to a magnet that attracts sparks of holiness; thus, they are clarified and removed from the muddle they were in. I will try to explain this more simply: The *mitzvot* teach us how we should behave in the world – which things we are allowed to use and which we are not, how we may eat certain foods and how we may not eat them, and so on. The ability to make use of the physical world in the particular way that the Torah instructs us – that is the path by which the sparks are clarified. For example, when an animal is slaughtered properly, the sparks of holiness are clarified from the elements of impurity in the animal, and thus it is permissible to eat it. This process is simpler with regard to observance of the *mitzvot*; we can learn from the *Or Ha-Chaim's* remarks on our passage how the same idea finds expression in relation to Torah study.

In his comments on this passage, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains how the Torah relates to all the sacrifices mentioned in the verse and in the words of Reish Lakish. In each sacrifice, he sees a different aspect of the way sparks are clarified through Torah.

**III. "For the burnt-offering"**

In this verse, the Torah reveals the wonders of our Torah and its power, saying: This is the law of the Torah, the benefits that its reading will bring about. **"For the burnt-offering" [*la-ola*] means that through it, the *Shekhina*, which is the aspect of *Kenesset Yisrael* [the people of Israel], will be uplifted [*tit'aleh*].** (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 7:37)

The *ola* here represents the uplifting of the *Shekhina*, which is the Divine revelation in our material world. In the command regarding the building of the *Mishkan*, it is stated: "And they shall make me a sanctuary, **that I may dwell in it"** (*Shemot* 25:8). The Divine expression in the midst of the people of Israel is the *Shekhina*. Through the study of Torah, the *Shekhina,* the Divine expression in the material world, rises up.

Torah study makes it possible to observe the *mitzvot* in a more precise and correct way, and even by itself, the more we engage in the study of Torah, the more the name of God spreads in the world – the more we deal with it and the more room and expression we give it in our material world. It turns out that the *Shekhina* is elevated through Torah study. It may be suggested that this amplifying of the *Shekhina* is itself the very clarification of the sparks. The essence of clarifying the sparks is to reveal the holiness and the good that is found in the world, and to clarify them from the mud and the mire. Thus, every revelation of the *Shekhina* in the world essentially clarifies the holiness from the physicality of the world, and gives it additional space and habitation in the world.

This is also how we can understand the comparison to the people of Israel. *Kenesset Yisrael* is a concept that represents Israel as a group and a nation. Israel as a nation represents the name of God in the world; the people of Israel are the chariot of the *Shekhina* (according to *Bereishit Rabba* 47, 8). Therefore, revealing the *Shekhina* that is in the Torah is an aspect of *Kenesset Yisrael*,which is also a representation of God in the world.

**IV. "For the meal-offering"**

"For the meal-offering [*la-mincha*]" – This word may be understood in several ways, all of which are correct: in the sense of "rest" [*menucha*], in the sense of "calm" or "satisfaction" [*nachat*], or in the sense of "deposit" [*hanacha*]. This meaning is the mystical dimension of: "Upon me this righteous man shall set [*yani'ach*] his head" (*Chullin* 91b), and the mystical dimension of: "When Shabbat came, rest [*menucha*] came," because the righteous, the foundation of the world, rests his head on it [i.e., on Shabbat, as a pillow, allegorically speaking]. This is also the mystical dimension of: "His left hand under my head, and his right hand embracing me" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 2:6). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The meal-offering symbolizes rest. The *Or Ha-Chaim* here compares it to Shabbat – God did not create anything on Shabbat, but it is precisely through the resting of Shabbat that holiness is revealed in the world. The holiness of Shabbat, which is akin to the world-to-come, bestows abundance on all of the days of action. It is precisely through rest that the depth and inner nature of the world is revealed, much more so than during the six days of creation. Shabbat is a testimony to the creation of the world; it reveals that throughout all six days of endeavors, it is God who really acts and performs in the world.

We see this idea with Yaakov Avinu, for it was precisely when he rested that he merited a revelation of the *Shekhina*. The *midrash* about the stones upon which Yaakov rested his head represents perhaps most clearly the elevation of sparks. Those stones were initially of no purpose or use, but they were utilized by the righteous Yaakov as a pillow and ultimately became the pillar upon which sacrifices were offered to God. There is no elevation of sparks greater than this – taking a stone, the most material object, and turning it into an altar.

The Torah is also a kind of resting place. On the one hand, one who is engaged in Torah study seems as if he is not doing anything in the world. On the other hand, it is precisely there that the innermost foundation of the world and our true role in it are revealed. Perhaps this is also the idea in *Shir Ha-shirim* that the *Or Ha-Chaim* alludes to*.* The embrace of the lover and his beloved is not obviously productive; nevertheless, precisely because that is its nature, it expresses in the most profound way the love that prevails between them.

**V. "For the sin-offering and for the guilt offering"**

"For the sin-offering and for the guilt-offering" – These are two aspects of clarification. One relates to the portions of holiness that descended from their high level at the beginning into the world of chaos; regarding them, it says "for the sin-offering." The second refers to the portions of the souls that were oppressed after Adam [sinned]; regarding them, it says "for the guilt-offering." The Torah is helpful for both of these two aspects, to clarify them from the place to which they descended. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

###

We saw above that the *Or Ha-Chaim* opened the discussion by distinguishing between two kinds of sparks: sparks that were lost as an inherent part of the existence of the material world, and sparks that came about as a result of human sins.

These two sacrifices, the sin-offering and the guilt-offering, represent these two categories. A sin-offering is brought for an inadvertent sin – something that is part of human nature, which is deficient and open to mistakes. A sin-offering does not see the sinner as guilty, but he must repair the consequences of his mistake and the harm it caused the world. On the other hand, a guilt-offering, as its name implies, is brought out of guilt. The person did a bad deed; he needs a sacrifice to atone not only for the consequences of his action, but also for the malice with which it was done.

These sacrifices repair the two types of sins, and the Torah also has the power to elevate these two types of sparks – both those that entered the world at the time of its creation, and those that we added with our sins. "[By engaging in the Torah], the light in it would have returned them to the good [path]" (*Eikha Rabba*, *petichta* 2).

**VI. "And for the consecration-offering"**

Not only [does the Torah] clarify, but it also it sets them [the sparks] in the place from which they are missing. This is the meaning of "and for the consecration-offering [*ve-la-milu'im*]” – to make them fill their [original] places [*le-malotam*]. This refers to the sparks that descended and to the parts of the souls that Samael captured from the first man, Adam. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The consecration-offering is one of completion. We find this offering in the *Mishkan*,when the building was completed and the *Mishkan* and its service had to be consecrated. The consecration-offering sets everything in its place and serves as the final hammer-blow for the consecration of the Levites and the construction of the *Mishkan.*

The same is true about Torah study. Not only does it clarify the sparks that are hidden in this world, but it also returns them to their proper place.

**VII. "The peace-offerings"**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the peace-offerings in two ways; the first is very practical, while the second relates more to the heavenly worlds. We will start with the second explanation, which sees a peace-offering as completing the slaughter of the evil inclination:

The Torah further alludes, when it says, "and for the sacrifice of peace-offerings," that the ultimate clarification of the sparks is by way of a sacrifice – for it is written: "For the Lord has a sacrifice in Botzra" (*Yeshayahu* 34:6), and *Chazal* said: "The Holy One, blessed be He, will in the future slaughter the Satan" (*Sukka* 52a). The meaning of “slaughter” here is that He will deprive the Satan of the component that enables it to live, namely, the spark of holiness. With these peace-offerings, all clarifications are completed. The verse informs us that this too will be achieved by means of involvement with Torah, for it will come about by virtue of the Torah study with which the righteous people occupy themselves in this world. *Chazal* (ibid.) alluded to this when they said that this slaughtering will be done in the following manner – the Holy One, blessed be He, on one side, and all the righteous holding a knife from the other side, to slaughter this sacrifice; for it is achieved by way of their power [i.e., of the righteous]. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The sacrifice of the peace-offering [*shelamim*], according to this interpretation, is the sacrifice that completes [*mashlim*] the process. The peace-offering is called by that name because it makes peace [*shalom*] between Israel and their Father in Heaven (*Tanchuma* 977). The sacrifice is consumed by both the altar and the person who brings the sacrifice. In this way, the peace-offering, more than any of the other sacrifices, represents an action of physical pleasure which is essentially spiritual service. This is the essence of the service of clarifying the sparks, to turn even material things into spiritual ones.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It seems that this is why this offering represents the final breaking of the evil inclination and the absolute clarification of the sparks: this clarification takes place when even things that are primarily profane, such as eating, become completely sacred.

In his first explanation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* touches upon a very practical point related to the clarification of the sparks, and paves a path in our service towards this goal:

The Torah says, "and for the sacrifice of the peace-offerings," in the manner that it is stated: "Whoever offers the sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me" (*Tehillim* 50:23), and *Chazal* expounded: “this refers to one who slaughters his evil inclination” (*Sanhedrin* 73b). This slaughter means that he emerges victorious over it, and with that victory, he clarifies from it the good elements that had been captured from the first man, Adam. This is a great virtue, that he should be strong enough to slaughter his evil inclination, as did David, who said: "My heart was slain within me" (*Tehillim* 109:22). This is a very great spiritual accomplishment toward which we direct our efforts, but it can only be achieved through the Torah, as it is stated: "If he assails you, lead him to the *beit midrash*" (*Kiddushin* 30b). And they also said (ibid.): The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I created for you the evil inclination; I created its antidote, the Torah. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Here, the *Or Ha-Chaim* discusses the Torah's power to break the evil inclination. The evil inclination, the human desires that draw a person to engage in the material affairs of our world – to a certain extent, they are the materiality to which the sparks have adhered. It can be said that every desire given to a person can be used for good or for evil, in accordance with Rashi's interpretation of the *mishna* in *Berakhot* (9:5): "'With all your heart' – with your two inclinations." Serving God by way of the evil inclination involves directing one’s desires toward what is holy – the desire for eating to Shabbat, the eating of matza, and the like; the desire for money to collecting money for charity; and so on.

One of the Torah’s features is its ability to help a person break his evil inclination. The *midrash* in the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* brought by the *Or Ha-Chaim* understands that the slaughter of sacrifices, such as the thanksgiving-offering, serves as a model for the breaking of the evil inclination. When something good happens to a person, the initial human instinct is to attribute that success to his own special abilities and qualities. The thanksgiving-offering says exactly the opposite: it was not me, but God, who did this. In this way, the Torah breaks the evil inclination.

Breaking the evil inclination is a very important part of the service of clarifying the sparks, because it is the foundation that enables it. The more a person submits to his evil inclination, the more he becomes enslaved to this world and the more the *Shekina* hides in it. When a person manages to overcome his animal desires and rise above them, and it is the word of God that guides him to do so, he essentially demonstrates that the word of God prevails over the lusts of the world, and thus he reveals the sparks that are hidden in that test.

The Gemara in *Kiddushin* cited by the *Or Ha-Chaim* teaches us to draw the evil inclination to the *beit midrash*. Why is that helpful? It seems that the *beit midrash* is a place where people are constantly occupied with breaking the evil inclination. All occupation with and study of the Torah teaches us how we can subordinate our hearts, our thoughts, and our bodies to the service of God, even though this is not what our bodies' forces are naturally or typically drawn to. Any Torah study can help, benefit, and improve a person's ability to break his evil inclination.

**VIII. Conclusion**

We saw the power of the Torah to elevate the sparks of holiness that are hidden in this world, and tried to draw lines to help us understand this concept. We saw its centrality in the *Or Ha-Chaim's* perception of the purpose of Israel and mankind in the world, and we explained how the Torah effects the elevation of sparks.

Of course, the *Or Ha-Chaim's* words contain great secrets that I do not pretend to fully understand. I tried here, to the best of my ability, to explain his words as I have understood them and in a way that is clear and accessible. May it be God's will that no mistake has resulted, or will result, from what I have written.

I see great importance in studying topics such as this, mainly because of their practical implications. When one reaches a better understanding of the spiritual meaning of the Torah and the *mitzvot* and appreciates their centrality in the task of repairing the world, it follows that one’s vigor and desire to do them will grow. May it be God's will that we merit to clarify all the sparks, by way of the Torah and the breaking of the evil inclination.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Editor’s note: Although the Gemara does not seem to relate explicitly to the peace-offering here, the *Or Ha-Chaim* includes it in his discussion, as will be seen further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Editor’s note: Note that much of the translation of the *Or Ha-Chaim* in this series is based on the explanatory English rendering by R. Eliyahu Munk, available at Sefaria.org, and is not a literal translation, though there are some differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the wilderness, eating non-consecrated meat was forbidden, and all eating of meat involved sacrificing an animal as a peace-offering to God; thus, elevation of the sparks occurred in an explicit and visible way every time meat was eaten. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)