YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Behaalotekha**

**Sicha of Harav Yair Kahn**

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**Dedicated in memory of**

**Rabbanit Yocheved bat Todros Menos Eliyahu z"l**

**whose yahrzeit is the 14th of Sivan,**

**by her granddaughter Vivian Singer**

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**"And it Came to Pass, When the Ark Set Forward"**

Summarized by Hadar Horowitz

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

Until the middle of *Parashat Behaalotekha*, the book of *Bamidbar* seems to be describing an ideal reality. The census depicts a nation organized into its tribes, with each tribe in its designated place in the camp. Priests and Levites are also counted, and organized according to their roles. Moshe finishes building the *Mishkan*, and the tribal princes present him with their contributions.

At this point, the people are ready to continue their journey towards the Land of Israel, and Moshe Rabbeinu suggests to Yitro that he join them:

And Moshe said to Chovav, the son of Reuel the Midyanite, Moshe's father-in-law: We are journeying to the place of which the Lord said: I will give it you; come you with us, and we will do you good; for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel. (*Bamidbar* 10:26)

However, the goodness and kindness that God already bestows upon the people in the wilderness is evident to all. While the purpose of Israel's journey is to reach their inheritance in the Land of Israel,life in the wilderness seems to have a number of advantages.

**The Good in the Wilderness**

First, consider the description in *Parashat* *Re’eh* of eating meat in the Land of Israel:

When the Lord your God shall enlarge your border, as He has promised you, and you shall say: I will eat flesh, because your soul desires to eat flesh; you may eat flesh, after all the desire of your soul. If the place which the Lord your God shall choose to put His name there is too far from you, then you shall kill of your herd and of your flock, which the Lord has given you, as I have commanded you, and you shall eat within your gates, after all the desire of your soul. (*Devarim* 12:20-21)

In the Land of Israel the people will be scattered across the length and breadth of the land, and many will live at a great distance from “the place which the Lord your God shall choose to put His name there.” Therefore, they will be permitted to slaughter animals and eat them in their own cities, far from the Temple. In the wilderness, on the other hand, the people could sacrifice burnt-offerings and eat most of the meat – because their encampments were close to the *Mishkan*.

In addition to the distance in the land from "the place that the Lord your God shall choose," God will reveal Himself there in a more limited manner. Divine providence in the wilderness was miraculous**,** including the manna they ate, clothing that did not wear out, and a miraculously easy walk (*Devarim* 8:2-5).

It is true that the goal was always to reach the Land of Israel, and that is what leads the Israelites forward in their journey, but entering the land involves danger:

For the Lord your God brings you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills… Beware lest you forget the Lord your God, in not keeping His commandments, and His ordinances, and His statutes, which I command you this day… then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage… and you say in your heart: My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth. But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He that gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. (*Devarim* 8:7, 11, 14, 14-18)

The danger stems from the fact that in the Land of Israel, God will lead the people through natural functioning. There will no longer be miracles like in the wilderness, and therefore the people of Israel may think that the great abundance and goodness they enjoy in the land comes from their success and talent.

It seems that the period of the wilderness was intended to educate the people, to teach them important lessons in advance of their arrival in the land – namely, that all good comes from God.

**God, the Census, and War**

The turning point in our *parasha* – after the idealized account at the beginning of the book – is found in the words of Moshe when the ark went forward:

And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moshe said: Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let those who hate You flee before You. (*Bamidbar* 10:35)

The words "and let Your enemies be scattered" indicate that this verse relates to a context of war. We also know that the census was taken in preparation for war, as stated in the command regarding the count: "All that are able to go forth to war in Israel: you shall number them by their hosts" (*Bamidbar* 1:3).

In the wilderness, the ark was with the people throughout their journey, including during war. In contrast, in the Land of Israel, the ark remains in its place while the people go to war alone. Thus, the challenge facing the people was to make God present in their wars even without the ark being there, to fulfill "you shall remember the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 8:18).

This challenge is portrayed in one of the Talmudic *aggadot* dealing with the destruction of the Temple:

There was among them one Bar Daroma ["son of the South"], who was able to jump a mile, and he slaughtered many of [the Roman soldiers]. The emperor took his crown and placed it on the ground, saying: Sovereign of all the world, may it please You not to deliver me and my kingdom into the hands of one man!

Bar Daroma was tripped up by his own utterance, as he said: "Have You not rejected us, O God, so that You, God, do not go forth with our hosts?"

But David also said thus [in *Tehillim* 60:12]!

David wondered if it could be so. (*Gittin* 57a)

Bar Daroma failed because of his pride in his own military abilities and therefore lost the battle. The Gemara asks: But what he said is a verse in *Tehillim;* David said the very same thing but was not held accountable! And it answers that there is a fundamental difference between them: Whereas Bar Daroma *declared* this as a factual assertion, David *wondered* about it, in the context of praying for salvation – as is evident from the very next verse:

Give us help against the adversary, for vain is the help of man. (*Tehillim* 60:13)

The question of recruiting yeshiva students for military service has been discussed many times. Some see military service today as the fulfillment of a civic duty, or as an act of kindness toward others. These are undoubtedly important values that find expression in military service. But it seems to me that we are dealing first and foremost with the realization of a vision – the vision of an army that protects the people in their country out of a sense of *yirat Shamayim* and the sanctification of God’s name.

What was once done by the priest appointed for war can be done today by everyone in his own environment, through the strengthening of Torah study and service of God, always focused on the sublime goal: "For the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you, and to give up your enemies before you; therefore shall your camp be holy" (*Devarim* 23:15).

[This *sicha* was delivered by Rav Kahn on Shabbat *Parashat Behaalotekha* 5779.]