YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**PARASHAT SHELACH**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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**Dedicated in memory of Mira Koschitzky *z"l*,**

**a staunch supporter of both Yeshivat Har Etzion and the   
Beit Midrash for Women Migdal Oz,**

**as well as Torah and Jewish causes throughout the world,**

**whose *yahrzeit* is 22 Sivan.**

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**The Generation of the Wilderness: "A Generation of Knowledge"**

Summarized by Eitan Sivan

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction: The Generation of the Wilderness**

In *Parashat Shelach* we read about the spies’ mission and their sin. As the Torah relates, the spies spread an evil report about the land (*Bamidbar* 13:32) and the people listened to them and wept over the fact that God had brought them out of Egypt. There is a well-known midrashic comment about this weeping:

"And all the congregation lifted up their voice and wept." Rabba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: That day was the ninth of Av, and the Holy One, blessed be He, said: They are now weeping for nothing, but I will fix [this day] for them as an occasion of weeping for generations. (*Sota* 35a)

In the wake of the terrible sin of the spies’ and the people’s response, the journey of the Israelites to the Land of Israel changed its course. God saw that the children of Israel were not worthy of entering the land, and He imposed an excruciating punishment: they would have to remain in the wilderness for forty years, until the entire generation died out (with the exception of Yehoshua bin Nun and Calev ben Yefuneh); only then would the next generation be able to enter the land.

Moreover, even their journey itself underwent a complete change. Until this point, they walked an easy and miracle-filled path; after the sin of the spies, they advanced on a harsh and arduous path. All the good things that God had given them "deteriorated" from great abundance to a mere ability to survive.

Thus, in *Parashat* *Beshalach*, at the beginning of the journey in the wilderness, the *manna* is described as follows: "the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (*Shemot* 16:31). The people enjoyed the taste of the manna, and many *midrashim* speak of its unique taste. But later – after the sin of the spies – the taste became foul: "And He afflicted you, and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not" (*Devarim* 8:3).

So much for the deterioration of the situation after the sin of the spies. But who are these people we are talking about? The generation that was condemned to die as a result of their sin is referred to as "the generation of the wilderness," but we know little about them apart from a limited number of negative stories. The *Tannaim* disagree about the essence of this generation, as we see in the Mishna in chapter *Chelek* (*Sanhedrin* 10:3; 108a) and in greater detail in a *baraita* brought in the Babylonian Talmud:

Our Rabbis taught: The generation of the wilderness has no portion in the world to come, as it is written: "In this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die" (*Bamidbar* 14:25). "They shall be consumed" refers to this world; "and there they shall die" refers to the world to come. And it is also stated: "Forty years long was I wearied with that generation [of the wilderness] to whom I swore in My wrath that they should not enter into My rest" (*Tehillim* 95:10). These are the words of Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Eliezer says: They will enter into the future world, for it is stated: "Gather My saints together to Me; those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice" (*Tehillim* 50:5). (*Sanhedrin* 110b)

We see here two diametrically opposed views of the people of Israel during their journey in the wilderness. According to Rabbi Akiva, they were a wicked generation, and God ended all relations with them – to the extent that they have no place in the world to come! In contrast, Rabbi Eliezer sees the generation in a very positive light, asserting that they are God's saints, those who made a covenant with Him. How did such a polarization of opinions arise? And what stands at the root of each of these positions?

**Rabbi Akiva's Opinion: "With Fury Poured Out"**

As mentioned, Rabbi Akiva's opinion regarding the generation of the wilderness is exceedingly harsh, to the point that none of its members merit life in the world to come.

What is the source for Rabbi Akiva's position? It seems likely that he drew his opinion from a prophecy of Yechezkel about the people of the generation of the wilderness:

And say to them: Thus says the Lord God: In the day when I chose Israel, and lifted up My hand to the seed of the house of Yaakov, and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up My hand to them, saying: I am the Lord your God; on that day I lifted up My hand to them, to bring them forth out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had sought out for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the beauty of all lands; and I said to them: Cast you away every man the detestable things of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. But they rebelled against Me, and would not hearken to Me; they did not every man cast away the detestable things of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt; then I said I would pour out My fury upon them, to spend My anger upon them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I wrought for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, among whom they were, in whose sight I made Myself known to them, so as to bring them forth out of the land of Egypt. So I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness… Therefore, say to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: When you pollute yourselves after the manner of your fathers, and go after their abominations… As I live, says the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out, will I be King over you; and I will bring you out from the peoples, and I will gather you out of the countries wherein you are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out; and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I enter into judgment with you, says the Lord God. (*Yechezkel* 20:5-10, 30, 32-36)

The prophet Yechezkel compares his generation, during a very low period in the history of the nation of Israel, to the people of "the generation of the wilderness." The prophet warns them about their future in light of their behavior. In this chapter, the people of the wilderness are described as evil and sinful people, who followed the abominations of Egypt and did not listen to God.

But the climax arrives in Yechezkel’s description of the exodus from Egypt – in which there is a significant change from the account of the story of the exodus with which we are familiar. We know the description in the book of *Shemot*, according to which God brought out the people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, but in *Yechezkel* there is a negative addition – "fury poured out." God did not rescue the people of Israel from Egypt in order to release them from their suffering, but to bring them to the wilderness and there to judge them for their evil behavior. This description imparts a very negative character to the process of the exodus from Egypt and indicates that the generation suffered from an inherent flaw, one that continued throughout the entire period of Israel's stay in the wilderness.

The severe attitude expressed by Yechezkel in relation to this generation well explains from where Rabbi Akiva drew his perspective. What is more, in light of these verses, it seems extremely difficult to understand the position of Rabbi Eliezer. If their sins and behavior are described in such negative terms, how can one say anything positive about such a generation?

**Rabbi Eliezer's Opinion: The Value of Education**

In order to understand Rabbi Eliezer's opinion, it will be helpful to examine a famous *aggada* about Choni ha-Me'agel:

Rabbi Yochanan said: This righteous man [Choni] was throughout the whole of his life troubled about the meaning of the verse: "A Song of Ascents, When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers" (*Tehillim* 126:1). **Is it possible for a man to dream continuously for seventy years?** One day, he was journeying on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found [grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me, so I too plant these for my children. (*Ta'anit* 23a)

The Gemara relates that Choni ha-Me'agel wondered about how people live in exile. After all, it is life without meaning; what then is its purpose?

Choni ha-Me'agel expounds this verse in relation to Yehotzadak, the father of Yehoshua the High Priest in the Second Temple Period. Yehotzadak was born in the exile, without a Temple and priestly service, and died before the rebuilding that came in the wake of the proclamation of Koresh. What is the meaning of the life of this priest who did not merit to perform the Temple service?

The question does not remain unanswered. Choni sees a person planting a carob tree – a tree that bears fruit only after a long time. Choni does not understand why he invests his time in planting a tree from which he will not derive any benefit, and he asks him about it. The man planting the tree answers that just as his ancestors planted a carob tree for him, so too he plants a carob tree for his descendants. That old man reveals to Choni the value of investing in the next generation, even in things that the person himself will never get to enjoy or even see.

This point seems fundamental to understanding the education of the generation of the wilderness. The people of that generation faced a life that was discouraging to the point of being impossible. Each person wandered through the wilderness for years, knowing that every year, on the night of the ninth of Av, he could die. Even if he survived one year, it was only a matter of time until he too would die, because he knew he would not enter the land – and during this time, he also experienced a tough and arduous journey. Such a life is not life! How could one get up in the morning in those circumstances and continue to follow Moshe?!

It seems that, like the old man who planted a carob tree for his descendants, the people of the generation of the wilderness also recognized that while there were things they would never merit to see, they wished to pass them on to their children. And indeed, the education they instilled in their descendants had clear effects, as we see in the great success of Yehoshua when he entered the land. A number of *midrashim* (for example, *Vayikra Rabba Tzav* 9, 1) refer to the generation of the wilderness as "a generation of knowledge"; we can understand, in light of the education they instilled in their children, why they were awarded this designation.

Essentially, it can be said that in order for the generation of Yehoshua to be able to reach its achievements, it was necessary that their parents, the generation of the wilderness, provide them with the proper education. Despite the sin of the spies, the members of that generation recognized the importance of entering the land and the need to educate their children so they would be able to conquer the land and establish the kingdom that God desired.

It seems that Choni ha-Me'agel learned the same lesson from Yehotzadak. It is true that life in exile is full of sorrow, and the privilege of serving in the Temple is certainly the ideal goal for a priest. But there is also another important goal: to ensure that your descendants will be able to fulfill these lofty ends, and this is achieved by way of educating them in that direction in the best possible manner.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Shelach* 5782.]