YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Ki-Tavo**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**"It is upon me to confirm!" – Responsibility and Mutual Accountability**

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**Introduction**

Our *parasha* describes Israel's entry into the land and instructs the people to erect an altar and write the Torah upon crossing the Jordan:

And Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying: Keep all the commandment which I command you this day. And it shall be, on the day when you shall pass over the Jordan into the land which the Lord your God gives you, that you shall set up great stones, and plaster them with plaster… And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this law explained well. (*Devarim* 27:1-2, 8)

Where exactly the altar should be erected is not stated, and indeed there are different opinions regarding its placement, ranging from the Gilgal (near the Jordan) to much more distant places. Be that as it may, what is clear from the verses is that the construction of the altar should be done on the very same day as crossing the Jordan. In other words, the first thing the people of Israel must do when they enter the land, before looking for a place to sleep, before booking rooms, is enter into a covenant with God. This is the way to enter the Land of Israel.

**Responsibility and Mutual Accountability**

Entering the land opens a new era for the Israelites. This is what we see in the verses immediately following the commandment to set up the stones:

And Moshe and the Levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Keep silence, and hear, O Israel; this day you have become a people to the Lord your God. You shall therefore hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do His commandments and His statutes, which I command you this day. (*Devarim* 27:9-10)

Upon crossing the Jordan and entering the land, the Israelites become the people of God. Of course, they were God's servants even in the wilderness, but being God's people in the land of Israel assumes new meaning, in two ways: responsibility and mutual accountability.

In the wilderness, as *Chazal* explain, God led the Israelites and took care of everything for them: from above He protected them with the clouds of glory, and from below He straightened their path. As the Torah describes in its terse manner: "Your clothing did not wear out upon you, neither did your foot swell, these forty years" (*Devarim* 8:4). Regarding everything they needed, asked for, or complained about, God answered them: water, bread, and even the Torah. In the wilderness, the people would appeal to Moshe and Moshe in turn would appeal to God, who would take care of the situation. But no more: from the time they enter the land and on, the Israelites must assume responsibility – because the manna will stop falling and the people must obtain food on their own. The same applies to responsibility for the Torah; when Moshe died, hundreds of laws were forgotten until Otniel ben Kenaz managed to restore them (*Temura* 16a)*.*

The transfer of responsibility to the Israelites is the reason that Yehoshua is always mentioned together with the elders. This was not the case with Moshe, who was an independent leader; the elders are mentioned in connection with Moshe only in *Parashat* *Behaalotekha* (*Bamidbar* 11:16-17, 24-30), and nobody knows what they did after they were appointed to their positions. But when Moshe died, and Israel entered the land, responsibility passed into the hands of the people of Israel.

Along with responsibility came a new sense of mutual guarantee. The people of Israel are one, and therefore all are responsible for the sins of all – the sin of a Jew in Afula affects a Jew in Eilat, and the sin of a Jew in Be'er Sheva affects a Jew in Binyamina – as we see from the sin of Achan.

In the framework of the responsibility and mutual accountability that the Israelites assume, they are to hold the assembly at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, at which the list of those who are "accursed" would be read. The Rashbam (*Devarim* 27:15) notes, quite rightly, that all eleven of the "accursed" commit their transgressions "in secret," as is emphasized again and again throughout the section. Why warn specifically about offenses committed in secret? Precisely for the two reasons we mentioned: responsibility and mutual accountability. Offenses committed in secret show a person's true nature. If a person transgresses in secret, we know that the fact that he generally refrains from sinning is because of social norms, or because he is embarrassed, or because it is beneficial for him to avoid sinning – but not because it is really important to him not to sin. The people of Israel must take responsibility even for transgressions committed in secret as well – for offenses that indicate a lack of identification with God's Torah – and root them out. As we say at the beginning of the morning service, a person must “be God-fearing [both] in secret and openly." Furthermore, every sin of every person has an impact and influence, even if it is not apparent to the eye. A person must realize that other people's secret transgressions are his concern too.

**"One who does not confirm"**

The theme of responsibility and mutual accountability brings us to the closing curse of the assembly at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival: "Cursed be one who does not confirm [*asher lo yakim*] the words of this law to do them, and all the people shall say: Amen" (*Devarim* 27:26). What is meant by: "who does not confirm"?

Rashi (ad loc.) explains that "here he included the entire Torah, and they accepted it upon them as a curse and an oath." According to this interpretation, emphasis is placed on the broad significance of the small, personal sin. The *mitzvot* are not just a collection of details, but rather a comprehensive system of commandments. What this means is that anyone who makes the blind go astray, or who perverts the justice due to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, not only transgresses the individual prohibition but essentially transgresses the entire Torah! Every sin is a form of rebellion against God, and its commission is a violation of the Torah as a whole, as a system. Similarly, a convert to Judaism cannot accept only some of the *mitzvot*, and so too a *mumar* (apostate) regarding even only one mitzvatransgresses the entire system of *mitzvot.* No sin is limited to its own realm in its impact; each damages the entire halakhic system.

However, the Ramban explains the verse differently:

In my opinion, this acceptance means that one acknowledges the commandments in his heart and sees them as truth, and he believes that one who observes them will receive reward and goodness and that one who transgresses them will be punished, and if someone denies any of them or considers it annulled forever – behold, he is cursed. However, if one transgressed any one of them, such as eating swine or some abominable thing because of desire, or he did not make a *sukka* or take the *lulav* [on the festival of Sukkot] because of laziness, he is not included within this condemnation – for Scripture did not say "one who does not perform [*asher lo ya’aseh*] the words of this law"; rather, it says "one who does not confirm [*asher lo yakim*]the words of this law to do them," like the meaning of "the Jews upheld [*kiymu*] and accepted" [the observance of Purim, *Esther* 9:27]. Behold, [our verse] is a condemnation of those who rebel [against the authority of the Torah] and those who deny [its validity]. (Ramban, *Devarim* 27:26)

According to the Ramban, this curse is not pronounced against a person who transgresses *mitzvot* out of laziness or desire, warning that every "small" sin impacts the entire Torah. Rather, in his opinion, the verse is speaking about a person who transgresses *mitzvot* because he does not identify with them; he does not actually believe in them.

The Ramban’s words bring us back to the need to warn specifically about transgressions that are committed in secret. As mentioned above, a person who truly identifies with the *mitzvot* will observe them even in secret – while one who observes the *mitzvot* only because of social norms will treat them lightly when nobody is looking. When I was young, people used to say that if you want to know what people are really thinking, you should read the graffiti they leave in toilet stalls. Today, you can just read anonymous talkbacks on the Internet. It is enough that a person thinks that nobody will know that he is the writer for him to respond with aggression and profanity. If this is the way he behaves when he can get away with it, this is his nature deep down.

Thus, according to the Ramban, to "confirm" the words of the Torah means to address any lack of identification. Social norms are important for the sake of maintaining public order, but do not suffice for the individual. If a person does not learn to identify with the *mitzvot* and to fear God in his very own heart, he will have a problem. And when a problem is pushed off rather than being addressed at its roots, it does not disappear; it simply breaks out somewhere else. If not in public, then in private; if not when one is of sound mind, then when drunk; if not in youth, then when one reaches old age.

**"It falls upon me to confirm"**

The Ramban is not satisfied with this interpretation of “confirming the Torah” in the sense of identifying with it personally, and goes on to cite a midrashic exposition from the *Yerushalmi*:

I have seen the following text in the *Yerushalmi*, tractate *Sota* (7:4): "‘One who does not confirm [*asher lo yakim* –literally, who does not stand up – the words of this law].’ But is there a law that falls [and must be stood up]? Rabbi Shimon ben Yakim says: This refers to the *chazan* [of the synagogue]. Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta says: This is the court on earth, for Rav Yehuda and Rav Huna said in the name of Shmuel: Because of [hearing this verse, regarding] this matter, King Yoshiyahu tore his clothes, saying: “It falls upon me to confirm!” Rabbi Asi said in the name of Rabbi Tanchum bar Chiya: [Even if a person] learned and taught [Torah], observed and fulfilled [its commandments], and he had the means to enable [others to study the Torah] and did not do so – he is included within the curse [mentioned in our verse]."

[Thus the Rabbis in the *Yerushalmi*] interpreted this "confirming" [of the Torah] as referring to the royal house and that of the Nasi, who have the power to uphold [the authority of] the Torah over those who negate it. And even if one was a perfectly righteous man in his own deeds, but he could have strengthened the Torah against the power of the wicked ones who negate it [and he failed to do so] – he is accursed. This is close to what we have explained. (Ramban, *Devarim* 27:26)

A person can be a very great *tzaddik* – he might pray in the *vatikin* service every day, know *Kodshim* and *Taharot* backwards and forwards, and observe all the *mitzvot* – but if he does not work to increase Torah knowledge and observance among the people of Israel, if he does not contribute to the establishment of the Torah in his community, he has a problem. How serious is the problem? Of such a person, we do not say that "he is a *tzaddik*, but he missed an opportunity," nor even that he "only" neglected a mitzva*.* According to the *Yerushalmi* brought by the Ramban, "he is included within the curse"! In order to “confirm” the Torah, one must not only uphold it and identify with it, but also promote it further.

The Ramban concludes that "this is close to what we have explained," because those who truly identify with God's Torah will work to spread it. One who has confidence in himself and believes in his mitzva observance will engage in *hagbaha* and raise the Torah scroll high for all the people to see. On the other hand, one who does not truly identify with the *mitzvot,* who observes them because that is "what is done" – when he comes to a community where observing the *mitzvot* is not "what is done," e.g., in university, he will be embarrassed. He will sneak off to the side to wash his hands before eating bread, he will recite *Birkat ha-Mazon* under his breath, and in that sense, he will not confirm the words of the law.

We must not be embarrassed. We must confidently and proudly raise the Torah scroll in front of everyone, and that means everyone. Even the Torah that the Israelites were commanded to write on the stones was directed mainly outward, towards the nations of the world. They were commanded to take whole stones, whitewashed with lime – in modern terms, to set up a billboard – and write on it the entire Torah "explained well" (*Devarim* 27:8), that is, "in seventy languages" (*Sota* 32a), for the whole world.

The task of spreading Torah is cast upon us. We must not be embarrassed and say that we are not worthy of the mission; we should not think that this is a job only for other people or other groups; we must not hesitate because all kinds of people advise otherwise. We must learn from Yoshiyahu, who was only eight years old when he began to reign over Yehuda and grew up in a culture of idolatry and sin. He understood that repentance depended on him, and he did not listen to his advisers; rather, he shouted: "It falls upon me to confirm!" Yoshiyahu could have continued to serve idols, as dictated by social norms, or even content himself with changing his own ways as an individual. But he believed in the *mitzvot* and understood that the responsibility rested on his shoulders – he tore his garments and tore himself away from his previous way of life to follow a different direction, shouting: "It falls upon me to confirm!"

We must confirm and uphold the Torah wherever we find ourselves and in every stage of life. In addition, we must also think ahead about how we can bring ourselves to places in which we will be able to confirm the Torah even more firmly. We can live in a religious community, pray three times a day, and study Gemara every day, but we could still be in the category of the "accursed," God forbid, if we do not work to confirm and uphold the Torah.

In this context, it is impossible not to point out that we cannot compare someone who upholds the Torah alongside his profession to someone who does so as a profession (such as a teacher), for two reasons: First, someone who volunteers in a certain field alongside another profession is an amateur. Anyone who works in that field as a profession is a professional. And second, the major investment that a person makes, for most of his life, is in his profession. He gets up in the morning and goes to work, stays there eight, nine, ten hours a day, and invests himself in it. Confirming and upholding the Torah as one's profession will have a much greater impact.

May God grant us good sense, and may we succeed in confirming the Torah among Israel.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat *Parashat Ki Tavo* 5782.]