**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT HAAZINU**

**"May My Teaching Drip Like Rain"**

**I. The Role of the Song of Haazinu**

This week we will explore the *Or Ha-Chaim’s* commentary to several verses that relate to the mitzvaof Torah study and how Torah should be studied. His interpretation here reflects his general approach to Torah study, while touching on fundamental questions that every Torah student must ask.

As a preface to the song of *Haazinu* (at the end of *Parashat Vayelekh*), the Torah describes the function of the song:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Behold, you are soon to sleep with your fathers; and this people will rise up, and go astray after the foreign gods of the land, where they are coming to be among them, and will forsake Me, and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be kindled against them on that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them; so that they will say on that day: Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us? And I will surely hide My face on that day because of all the evil which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned to other gods. 

Now therefore write this song for you, and teach you it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore to their fathers, flowing with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten their fill, and become fat; and turned to other gods, and served them, and despised Me, and broken My covenant; then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them, that this song shall testify before them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed; for I know their inclination how they do even now, before I have brought them into the land which I swore. (*Devarim* 31:16-21)

In this passage, God describes how Israel will sin after they enter the land, and says this very song will serve as a witness against the Israelites that their sin was in fact foreseen. However, what need is there for a witness to Israel's sins? Does God, as it were, only want to say, "I told you so" to Israel? Is that the entire function of the song?

It is possible that we can find an answer to this question in the first few verses of the song. The entire event described in the preface at the end of *Parashat Vayelekh* appears in the song itself, beginning with 32:4 and on; the first three verses serve as a kind of introduction:

Listen, heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drip like rain; let my speech flow like the dew, like gentle rain on tender plants, like showers upon the grasses. When I call out the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our God. (*Devarim* 32:1-3)

The topic in these verses is the word of God, referred to as a "teaching" [*lekakh*] or a "speech" [*imra*]. In our terms – we are talking about the Torah, the word of God. But it is not quite clear what exactly is being said about the Torah here. What are the people of Israel commanded to do with the Torah? What can be learned from these verses about our relationship to the Torah? And how does all this relate to the difficult prophecy in the song that follows immediately afterwards?

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* commentary to these verses teaches us several principles regarding Israel's relationship to the Torah that will help clarify these matters.

**II. The Necessity of the Torah**

In the verses cited above from the song of *Haazinu*, the Torah is compared to dew and rain. Dew and rain relate to the agricultural world and are essential for the cultivation of grain and other foods. This comparison brings the *Or Ha-Chaim* to quote the *mishna* in tractate *Avot*, where the Torah is similarly compared to flour: "If there is no flour, there is no Torah" (*Avot* 3:17).

In his first interpretation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that this comparison teaches us about the necessity of the Torah:

Meaning, based on what *Chazal* said: “If there is no flour, there is no Torah" – Scripture’s intent with this statement is that just as God gives rain to support and provide [for their physical survival], so they themselves must study the Torah [for their spiritual survival]. This is the purport of the verse: Let it drip, just like I cause the rain to drip, [‘it’ being] my teaching” – as if it had said, “Let my teaching drip down like rain.” (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 32:2)

The dew and rain that give rise to flour are the basis of human life. In contrast to these necessities, the Torah might have been perceived as a luxury. The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that the verse should be understood in its plain sense: Just as God gives rain to the world and the world cannot exist without it, so too He gives Torah to the world, and the world cannot exist without it.

This point is clarified in a passage in tractate *Shabbat* about the revelation at Mount Sinai:

Chizkiya said: What is meant by: "You caused judgment to be heard from heaven; The earth feared, and was tranquil" (*Tehillim* 76:9)? If it feared, why was it tranquil, and if it was tranquil, why did it fear? Rather, first it feared, and ultimately it was tranquil. And why did it fear? As was stated by Reish Lakish, for Reish Lakish said: Why is it written: "And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (*Bereishit* 1:31)? What is the purpose of the additional "the" [*ha-shishi*]? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the works of creation and said to them: If Israel accepts the Torah, you shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness. (*Shabbat* 88a)

There are also other statements of *Chazal* that compare the Torah to water:

The expounders of metaphors said: "They did not find water" (*Shemot* 15:22) – [meaning, they did not find] words of Torah, which are compared to water. From where do we know that they are likened to water? As it is stated (*Yeshayahu* 55:1): "Ho! All who are thirsty, go to the waters!" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Beshalach*, *massekhta de-Vayasa* 1)

These statements come to teach how necessary the Torah is for the existence of man and the world. R. Chaim of Volozhin illustrates the idea in tangible terms:

And the truth, without any doubt at all, is that if the entire world, from one end to the other, would be empty (God forbid) literally for even one moment from our involvement with and contemplation of the Torah, immediately all of the worlds would be destroyed, supernal and terrestrial, and would become emptiness and chaos (God forbid). And so too, the abundance of the light they receive, or its lack (God forbid) – all of it is only according to the context and the degree of our involvement with [Torah]. For that reason, we make the blessing upon it: "…and the life of the world did You plant among us." (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, gate 4, chap. 11)

In R. Chaim’s understanding, the words of Torah study are what hold the world together, and if there were no Torah study in the world for even a moment, the world would cease to exist. Even if we do not take this idea to such an extreme, it is clear from the above sources that observance of Torah and *mitzvot* as the purpose of the world constitutes the justification for its existence. This is one way to explain the comparison between Torah and rain, according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*.

**III. Measure for Measure**

However, the *Or Ha-Chaim* can also be read differently:

Scripture’s intent with this statement is that just as God gives rain to support and provide [for their physical survival], so they themselves must study the Torah [for their spiritual survival]. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

This sentence seems to describe a certain reciprocity between God and the people of Israel. We perceive the fact that God sends rain to the world as part of "nature." We are not sensitive to the novelty in each and every drop that falls, so much so that in a certain sense, the fact that it rains is self-evident to us.

It is possible that the *Or Ha-Chaim* understands the comparison between rain and Torah as a type of measure for measure. Just as rain is a clear, self-evident part of nature, so God expects that Torah study should be that way as well. It is God's desire that Torah study be perceived not as an extraordinary act but as a natural and normal action that can in a sense be taken for granted, like rainfall, as part of nature. Here, the necessity of the Torah stems from the gratitude we have towards God, who runs the world as nature that we can plainly see.

**IV. Rain as Reward for Torah Study**

In addition to the two interpretations we have seen so far, the *Or Ha-Chaim* also suggests another way to understand the relationship between rain and the Torah:

As if it said, "May my teaching drip like rain," that God does not ask a person to study Torah until He has provided them with enough to live on. And from the foundation of the matter, you may learn [the converse] – that if drops of Torah do not drip down from the people's lips, God does not desire to provide rain for them. This is what we explained regarding the *Tanna*’s statement, "If there is no flour, there is no Torah" – meaning: If you see that there is no flour, *know that* there is no Torah. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Here, the relationship is one of reward and punishment. Rain is often used in the Torah as an expression of reward and punishment (as in the *ve-haya im shamo'a* passage of *Shema,* in the section of the blessings and curses, and elsewhere). Here too, the *Or Ha-Chaim* proposes a new reading of the *mishna* in *Avot*: If there is no flour, *that is an indication* that there is no Torah – that is to say, there is a correspondence between Torah study and God's desire to sustain the world.

On a deeper level, the principle is the same as the principle underlying the previous explanations – that the world cannot exist without Torah – though here the reason is slightly different.

**V. "My Teaching" [*Likchi*] and "My Speech" [*Imrati*]**

After clarifying the necessity of the Torah for the continued existence of the world, the *Or Ha-Chaim* asks why the Torah is referred to here with two different terms: "*likchi*" and "*imrati.*" He suggests that this doubling corresponds to a doubling in the parts of the Torah itself:

Moshe repeats the message in different words, "*likchi*" and "*imarti*," corresponding to the two *Torot*, i.e., the Written Law and the Oral Law. Corresponding to the Written Law, he used the term "*likchi*" [lit., "my taking"], because God gave it from His hand to the hand of Moshe, written by God's own finger. Although God only gave him two tablets containing the Ten Commandments, these Ten Commandments contained within them everything that is written in the entire Torah, as in the statement of *Chazal* (*Bamidbar Rabba* 13). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The unbreakable connection that exists between the Written Law and the Oral Law is mentioned in an endless number of Rabbinic statements, and it is possible that it was already mentioned in God's words about Avraham: "Because Avraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (*Bereishit* 26:5). The Oral Law completes the Written Law. Therefore, the *Or Ha-Chaim* teaches us, not only can you not separate the Oral Law from the Written Law, but they are actually one – and both are equally necessary for the sustenance of the world.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* goes on to explain with precision, based on the comparison to rain and dew, two differences between the Written Law and the Oral Law:

Moshe labeled the Written Law "rain," and the Oral Law "dew," because the Written Law is the main thing and the foundation of everything. The Oral Law is a collection of adjustments and details that were not spelled out clearly in the Written Law but only hinted. This is why Scripture chose, in its comparison, to compare the Written Law to rain – because it is the foundation and main thing of all. And the Oral Law [is compared] to dew, because it is an improvement and rounds out what the rain did, just as the Oral Law does for the Written Law. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The Written Law is indeed the foundation, whereas the Oral Law is only adjustments and details, but still, without the two of them, the world cannot exist. The dew may not be the main thing, but it is still important and significant, because it completes the work of the rain. This beautiful metaphor succeeds impressively in showing how, on the one hand, the world needs a connection between these two *Torot*, while, on the other hand, a balance must still be maintained in which there is a main thing and something secondary to it.

If we can take the metaphor a little further, we can suggest that while rain comes from the sky, dew originates from the earth, since it is produced by the condensation of water vapor. So are these two *Torot*. The Written Law comes in its completed form from heaven; the Oral Law, on the other hand, is found in the air of the Written Law, like the vapors that produce the dew, but it rises from the earth as the product of humans.

So far, we have focused on the first of the introductory verses to the song – the verse that emphasizes the importance and fundamentality of Torah study for the entire world. Returning to the question with which we started, we can suggest that this is really where the main point of the song is found. If indeed Israel will listen to God, and His teaching will drip down like rain and His speech will flow like dew, then everything that is said in this song will not take place at all, because Israel will remain on the good path. Essentially, this verse summarizes the essence of the song: Torah is necessary for the world, and therefore, when you leave the Torah, the world also begins to go wrong and deviate from its usual behavior.

**VI. "When I call out the name of the Lord"**

The second verse in the introduction to the song adds a very important layer. After such a convincing introduction, in which Moshe teaches the children of Israel that the world cannot exist without the Torah and how necessary the Torah is for the world, it seems obvious that Israel will invest in Torah study in order to sustain the world and merit rain. But Moshe continues and says that this is not enough:

It further means to convey that even though he connected involvement in Torah to rain and dew, this should not be the people's intention when studying Torah; rather, [their only intention should be] to study God's Torah. This is the meaning of *ki* [translated above as “when”] – the reason that "I call out the name of the Lord" – i.e., learn His Torah, which is His name – is in order to ascribe greatness to our God. This is called Torah study for its own sake, to glorify and exalt His glorious name. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 32:3)

A *mishna* in tractate *Avot* teaches us the same principle:

Antigonos, man of Sokho, received the [Oral Law] from Shimon the righteous. He used to say: Be not like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve *not* in the expectation of receiving a reward, and let the fear of heaven be upon you. (*Avot* 1:3)

Torah study should not be for the sake of receiving a reward, but for its own sake. Much has been written about the concept of “Torah for its own sake” – how exactly are we to define Torah study as being for its own sake, and for the sake of what, exactly, should the study be directed? The words of the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* on this matter are well-known:

But the truth is that the idea of "for its own sake" means for the sake of the Torah. And the matter is as the Rosh explained on the statement by Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Tzadok (*Nedarim* 62a): “Do things for the sake of their Maker – for the sake of the Holy One, blessed be He, who did all of it for His own sake. And discuss them for their own sake – all of your discussions and give-and-take about the words of Torah should be for the Torah's sake, for example, to know and to understand, to increase the lessons learned, and to work towards an even deeper understanding, and not to provoke others, nor for egotistical reasons." (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, gate 4, chap. 3)

When we closely examine the words of Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Tzadok, we see that they have two parts: The second part does in fact relate to Torah study for the sake of the Torah itself – "discuss them for their own sake." But the first part deals with Torah study for the sake of God – "do things for the sake of their Maker."

The *Or Ha-Chaim* takes the same approach and explains Torah study as calling out the name of God – which results in praising the greatness of God. That is to say, the goal of Torah study is to magnify and exalt God in the world.

The combination of the two verses teaches us a great lesson: The Torah is indeed the basis and foundation of the existence of the world – but only such Torah that is learned for its own sake. Or essentially, if we take the idea one step further, calling out in the name of God is what sustains the world. Learning Torah is not an end in itself, but the most basic and fundamental way a person can call out in the name of God in the world. A person can also call out in the name of God by observing *mitzvot*, behaving with positive character traits, and performing acts of kindness; all this contributes to the continued existence of the world.

If this is true, it seems that the relationship between rain and dew is also necessary for the existence of the world. The Oral Law, in which the partnership between God and human creativity finds expression (when man creates and acts in connection with the Torah), is the greatest calling out in the name of God in the world.

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim's* understanding, the introduction to the song of *Haazinu* essentially teaches us the most fundamental point in the song. Torah study *for the purpose of magnifying the glory of heaven in the world* is what determines whether Israel will sit peacefully on their land or whether they will "merit" everything described in the song. This point is emphasized just before the end of the book of *Devarim*, after having been woven throughout the book and repeated over and over again.

May we merit to internalize this message in our days as well.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)