YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**CHanuka**

**Sicha of HarAV Shabtai Rappaport**

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Dedicated to the memory of Abraham Gontownik *z"l*,

in observance of his twenty-fifth *yahrzeit* on the 29th day of Kislev,

and in honor of the births of our grandchildren,

Mia, to Ranan and Jordana, Avery, to Yoni and Bellene,
and Reuben, to Ezra and Lilly

Anne and Jerry Gontownik and Family

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**Yitzchak, The Mishkan, and Chanuka**

Translated by David Strauss

*Yalkut Shimoni* makes some surprising connections between the Temple, the *Mishkan*, the *Avot*, and Chanuka:

When the Temple was completed in the month of Bul, it remained locked for twelve months [until the following Tishrei, when it was dedicated], and all were murmuring about Shlomo, saying: Is he not the son of Batsheva; how can the Holy One, blessed be He, rest His *Shekhina* in his handiwork? And the Holy One, blessed be He, thought to mingle the joy of the Temple with the month in which Avraham was born, in the month of Eitanim, i.e., the month of Tishrei. And why is it called the month of Eitanim [= "the mighty ones"]? Because Avraham was born in it, as it is stated: "*Maskil* of Eitan the Ezrachi” (*Tehillim* 89:1). And when it was opened, in the month of the festivals, and he offered the sacrifices, and the fire descended, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "Now the work is completed," as it is stated: "Thus all the work was completed" (I *Melakhim* 7:51). And about this it is stated: "Your thoughts are very deep" (*Tehillim* 92:6).

And similarly you find regarding the work of the *Mishkan*:Rabbi Chanina said: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the work of the *Mishkan* was completed, but it was left folded up until Nissan, as it is written: "On the first day of the first month, you shall set up the *Mishkan* of the Tent of Meeting" (*Shemot* 40:2). And Israel were murmuring about Moshe, saying: Why wasn’t it erected immediately; maybe there is some flaw in it? And the Holy One, blessed be He, intended to mingle the joy of the *Mishkan* with the month in which Yitzchak was born, as it is written: "Knead it and make cakes" (*Bereishit* 18:6)…

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: It is incumbent upon Me to make restitution. What restitution did the Holy One, blessed be He, make? The rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans, and so too, the Holy One, blessed be He, will compensate Marcheshvan in the future. (*Yalkut Shimoni* on *Melakhim*, 184)

This *midrash*, which is also cited in *Haggahot Ha-Gra* on the *Shulchan Arukh* (beginning of OC 671) as an additional source that the *Mishkan* was completed on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, is puzzling on several counts. First: Why is the Temple associated specifically with Avraham, to the extent that its dedication was delayed until the month in which he was born, and why is the *Mishkan* associatedspecifically with Yitzchak? The reverse – that the *Mishkan* is associated with Avraham, and the Temple with Yitzchak – would have been understandable, since the first manifestation of the *Shekhina* among the people of Israel was connected to Avraham, and the second to Yitzchak. But as it appears in the *Yalkut Shimoni*, it is difficult to understand. Second, why should these dedications be associated specifically with the births of Avraham and Yitzchak? The dedication of the Temple or *Mishkan* marks the completion of work, and it would seem more understandable to correlate them to events that took place during the lives of the holy patriarchs. Moreover, from the fact that the *midrash* says God compensated the twenty-fifth of Kislev with the rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans, it seems that there is a connection between Chanuka and the dedication of the *Mishkan* (as that was the day on which the work of the *Mishkan* was completed, and that is the day of compensation for its dedication), and thus, according to the *midrash*, also a connection to Yitzchak. Why is the rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans connected to the *Mishkan* and Yitzchak, more than to the Temple and Avraham?

It seems that the birth of Yitzchak and the dedication of the *Mishkan* do have something in common. Until the birth of Yitzchak, there was room to say that the idea of constantly “calling in the name of God” was a transient phenomenon. It was created by Avraham, who "raised up justice from the east" (*Yeshayahu* 41:2), and as long as Avraham lived, it had a place – but this call was not properly received in the world, and it would be expected that after Avraham’s death, the phenomenon would subside and the world would return to its former wicked ways. However, when Yitzchak was born, it became clear that this idea of constantly serving God, and walking in His ways, is in fact a permanent phenomenon, for Avraham had a son like himself; "Yitzchak the son of Avraham." In fact, this message was conveyed not just when Yitzchak was born, but even earlier, when God said about Avraham’s future descendants: "For I have known him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they will keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (*Bereishit* 18:19). The Torah informs us that there will be a legacy after Avraham that “will keep the way of the Lord.”

And so it was with the *Mishkan*. The Ramban writes in several places, especially at the beginning of the book of *Vayikra*, that the purpose of the *Mishkan* was to immortalize God's revelation to the people of Israel at Sinai. Until the *Mishkan* was erected, it could have been said that this revelation, which introduced the ideas of prophecy, Torah, and the election of the Jewish people, was a one-time occurrence, a gracious act of Divine kindness. But once the *Mishkan* was erected, it was evident to all that the *Shekhina* dwells in the handiwork of Israel in a constant and permanent way. For this reason, the month of Yitzchak's birth was chosen for the erection of the *Mishkan*, because they both represent the establishment of a perpetual connection between the Creator and His people Israel. And since this concept pertains already at the very announcement of the birth of Yitzchak, the erection of the *Mishkan* took place at that same time.

While there was laughter and joy at the birth of Yitzchak, in a world that had already been prepared for it through years of the phenomenon of “calling in the name of God,” we do not find any special rejoicing at the birth of Avraham, but only the simple statement: "Terach begat Avraham" (*Bereishit* 11:27). The world into which Avraham was born was the world of Terach, a world in which Nimrod ruled, a world of darkness and gloom, of idolatry and an inability to comprehend and grasp that there is a Creator of the universe. It was in this world of darkness that Avraham rose to provide illumination. The Gemara states:

It was taught in the school of Eliyahu: The world is to exist six thousand years; the first two thousand years are to be void; the next two thousand years are the period of the Torah, and the following two thousand years are the period of the Messiah. Through our many sins, a number of these have already passed [and the Messiah is not yet here].

From when are the two thousand years of the Torah [to be counted]? If we say from the giving of the Torah at Sinai – there are not that many [years from then] till now [i.e., the year four thousand after Creation], for if you compute the years [from creation to the giving of the Torah, you will find that] they comprise two thousand and a part of the third thousand. Rather, [the period is to be counted] from [the time of]: “and the souls they had ‘made’ in Charan” (*Bereishit* 12:5), for we have it as a tradition that Avraham was at that time fifty-two years old. (*Avoda Zara* 9a)

That is to say, the two thousand years of Torah in the world began with Avraham’s birth, though even he did not know his Creator until years later. The birth of Avraham in and of itself demonstrated the dawning of the Creator's grace in the world, that from now on, the world would be prepared to receive the Torah and to walk in the ways of the Creator, even though it was at that time still in darkness and chaos. The dawning of the Torah was precisely in these years of chaos. And so, when we survey the state of the world and its history – it was with the birth of Avraham that the world became ready for the Torah, and this preparation was carried out gradually, until its culmination and completion at the time of the blossoming of the Oral Torah, which revealed the daily relationship of the Torah to the world, when the Torah's two thousand years were completed.

And this is the idea of the Temple built by Shlomo. This Temple was not built in the wilderness under the Clouds of Glory, when the people of Israel were in a state of repentance and constant communion with God – "And they sit down at Your feet, receiving of Your words" (*Devarim* 33:3) – but in Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Israel, which was on its way to becoming the leading kingdom of the world. It was built after centuries which, far from presenting a single unbroken sequence of acts of piety on the part of the Jewish people, were filled with sin and the destruction of the *Mishkan* in Shilo. Even King Shlomo does not delude himself into believing that Israel will not sin from now on; on the contrary, the Temple is meant to be a place of prayer *even* in situations that are not the epitome of perfection. As Shlomo says in his prayer at the dedication of the Temple (I *Melakhim* 8):

When your people are smitten down before the enemy, when they sin against You… then may You hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your people… when heaven is shut up, and there is no rain, when they sin against You… then may You hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants… if there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, if there be blasting or mildew, locust or caterpillar; it their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatever plague, whatever sickness there be.

And not only this, but even:

Concerning the stranger that is not of Your people Israel, when he shall come out of a far country for Your name's sake.

And even if there will be a sin so severe that it leads to exile:

If they sin against You – for there is no man that does not sin – and You become angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near… then may You hear their prayer and their supplication in heaven.

On the day of the building of the Temple, a new light shone in the world, a light of hope and *chesed*, as if to say: The world is a place prepared for repentance, for prayer, for God's providence – despite the actions of all of humanity. The light of this *chesed* is connected to the day of the birth of Avraham, and therefore, the dedication of the Temple had to be on a day fit for such light – in the month of Tishrei.

In truth, Yitzchak symbolizes the constant and abiding connection that exists between the people of Israel and God in all circumstances. He is the unblemished offering who is barred from leaving the Holy Land even during a period of famine, and he is the one who will plead the case of Israel. When God tells Avraham and Yaakov: "Your children have sinned against Me," they will answer Him: "Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name," but Yitzchak will say:

Are they my children and not Your children? When they gave precedence to “we will do” over “we will hear” before You, You called them, “Israel My son, My firstborn”: now they are my sons, not Your sons! Moreover, how much have they sinned? How many are the years of man? Seventy. Subtract twenty, for which You do not punish, [and] there remain fifty. Subtract twenty-five which comprise the nights, [and] there remain twenty-five. Subtract twelve and a half of prayer, eating, and nature's calls, [and] there remain twelve and a half. If You will bear all, it is well; if not, half be upon me and half upon You. And should You say they must all be upon me – I offered myself up before You [as a sacrifice]! (*Shabbat* 89b)

Thus, by virtue of Israel's self-sacrifice to God, which is rooted in Yitzchak, they are bound to Him with an indissoluble bond in every situation, even when they sin so grievously that the other two holy patriarchs cannot find a plea in their defense. And from the outset, when the *Mishkan* was erected, symbolizing the permanent abode of the *Shekhina* among the Jewish people, there was no more propitious time than the month of Yitzchak's birth. The day on which the *Mishkan* was completed, the twenty-fifth of Kislev, of course belongs here as well, but that day was not yet revealed and actualized until many centuries later.

When the wicked Hellenistic monarchy stood to eradicate the Torah from Israel, and to darken the eyes of Israel from the commandments – and indeed, the Torah had already begun to be forgotten, which is when disputes between the *Tannaim* began, and it seemed that Israel had no hope left – but through the self-sacrifice of the Hasmoneans, it was made clear that the bond between Israel and the Almighty was not to be severed. Even when it was decreed that they must “write on the horn of the ox that they had no part in the God of Israel,” still, “the portion of the Lord is His people” (*Devarim* 32:9) and He performed a miracle and a wonder for them, and enlightened their eyes and their hearts with the light of the Torah. And it was precisely because they forgot the traditions and the laws that were given to Moshe at Sinai that the Oral Law blossomed and grew, for "it is not in heaven," and God conceded to them: "My children have vanquished Me!" (*Bava Metzia* 59b). It turns out that the essence of Yitzchak is the establishment of the connection between God and the people of Israel, which stems from their self-sacrifice from below, and this is the idea of the *Mishkan* and the rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans.

Perhaps this explains the dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel regarding whether the candles of Chanuka are gradually diminished or increased. Beit Shammai learned from the bulls of the festival of Sukkot that the number of candles decreases each day, and the *Shem Mi-Shmuel* explains that just as at the time of Sukkot, the light of Divine favor shines suddenly on the people of Israel after the judgment of Rosh Hashana, and there is great joy that finds expression in the large number of sacrifices, but it diminishes with habituation and therefore the sacrifices also decrease in number – so too on Chanuka, when God’s light shined on the people of Israel after they had lost all hope, their joy was great at first, but it diminished with habituation, and thus the candles also decrease in number. It seems we can say that Beit Hillel maintain that the Hasmonean rededication of the Temple was not merely the shining of light from above, with God’s *chesed*, into the darkness, but rather an expression of Israel's self-sacrifice and establishing them as a portion of the inheritance of God, which is the essence of the *Mishkan* and of Yitzchak. This idea does not diminish with habituation; on the contrary, it increases with additional consecration and with the decreased darkness that comes in its wake, and therefore the candles also increase.

May it be God's will, after these millennia of Israel's self-sacrifice for the sake of God and His Torah, that He will repay the debt of the month of Marcheshvan and shine a new light of hope and redemption into the world of darkness, and that we will merit the dedication of the Holy Temple speedily in our days; *amen*.

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(Translation edited by Sarah Rudolph)