YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat BEHAR**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**A Society of *Chesed***

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**Behar – A new beginning or a continuation?**

*Parashat Behar* opens with an unusual formulation:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai, saying. (*Vayikra* 25:1)

Rather than simply stating that God called to Moshe, the verse specifies the location of the conversation – Mount Sinai. This deviation from the norm attests to a difference between this communication and God's other communications to Moshe – and indeed, it is evident that *Parashat Behar* is of a different character than the preceding *parashot*, as it focuses on *mitzvot* that are connected not to the sanctuary and holiness but to the Land of Israel and the world of buying and selling.

On the other hand, we should also note the connections and parallels between our *parasha* and *Parashat Kedoshim*: the mitzva of *neta reva'i* there (19:24), which speaks of the sanctity of the land, somewhat resembles the mitzva in our *parasha* regarding the *shemitta* (sabbatical) year, and social-moral *mitzvot* are found in both *parashot*. The concluding formula, "I am the Lord," which is very prevalent in *Parashat Kedoshim*,also recurs in our *parasha* several times.

Thus we find here a certain tension between seeing our *parasha* as opening a new statement, on one hand, and the continuity implied by commandments that are similar to what was said earlier, on the other. Furthermore, it seems that even regarding the commandments that are a continuation of *Parashat Kedoshim*, our *parasha* gives them a new and different angle. The opening commandment of *Parashat Behar* speaks of the mitzva of the *shemitta* year, which involves a total cessation of working the land. Its purpose, according to our *parasha*,is not just to give the land a rest but to provide sustenance for the weak in society.

And the sabbatical-produce of the land shall be for food for you: for you, **and for your servant and for your maid, and for your hired servant and for the settler by your side that sojourn with you**; and for your cattle, and for the beasts that are in your land, shall all the increase thereof be for food. (*Vayikra* 25:6-7)

So too in the Talmudic discussions of the *shemitta* year, the social plane occupies a central position. The Gemara asks when the sabbatical year is observed and brings a statement of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi:

Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] says: [It is written]: "Now this is the matter of the **release** (*shemitta*); [every creditor] shall **release**" (*Devarim* 15:2). The text speaks of two releases: one, the release of land; and the other, the release of money. When the release of land is in operation, the release of money is to be operative, and when the release of land is not operative, the release of money is not to be operative. (*Gittin* 36a)

Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi creates a dependence between the "broad" commandment – cessation of labor on the land – and the law of the remission of debts. This connection presents the law of remitting debts as vital and central to the entire commandment – the importance of charity and assistance to the weak, which is manifested both in the release of the land and in the remission of debts.

One might have understood that the mitzvaof the *shemitta* year focuses on the sanctity of the land, as a direct continuation of the sections dealing with the sanctuary and of the sanctity of the festivals in *Parashat Emor* – but as noted, the Torah disconnected them with the declaration that the mitzvawas said "at Mount Sinai," and laid greater emphasis on the social aspects of the mitzva that are in consonance with both *Parashat Kedoshim* and the *mitzvot* in the *mitzvot* in the continuation of *Parashat Behar*. But what is the point of linking a social commandment, one that is "between man and his fellow," to the place where the greatest manifestation of God's *Shekhina* took place, the very pinnacle of the expression of closeness "between man and God"? It seems that this is part of the famous question raised by the *midrash* and cited by Rashi:

"At Mount Sinai" – What has the sabbatical year to do with Sinai?! (Rashi, *Vayikra* 25:1)

**"To do Righteousness and Justice"**

The Torah's decision to link a mitzva centered on giving to Mount Sinai, the place where the Torah was given, teaches us an important lesson – that the highest point to which one should aspire in one's religious life is giving to the other. The Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, and the entire corpus of Jewish thought are replete with intimations that the expression of our bond with God is found in acts of charity and aid.

For instance, *Parashat Vayera* explains why God chose Avraham, and why He will continue to choose his descendants forever:

For I have known him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice; so that the Lord bring upon Avraham that which He spoke of him. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

We were chosen as God’s people in the first place on account of our doing righteousness and justice, and even after we received the Torah and were commanded in all of its *mitzvot*, the importance of social action did not wane. As Shimon the Righteous says in *Pirkei Avot*:

The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on Divine service, and on acts of kindness. (*Avot* 1:2)

The *Rishonim* also wrote extensively on these subjects. The Rambam at the end of *Hilkhot Matanot Aniyim*, as well as the Ramban at the end of his exposition on *Kohelet*, devoted considerable and unusual length to the importance of charity and concern for the weak, including many proofs from the Torah and *Chazal*.

Beyond the importance of these *mitzvot* in themselves, they also constitute a path by which one can draw near to God and cleave to Him, via “walking in His ways.” In his great work, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam describes the various levels in the attainment of sanctity and perfection, concluding with a description of the highest level:

Thus the intent set forth in this verse [*Yirmiyahu* 9:23, “For I am the Lord, who performs kindness, justice, and righteousness in the land, for these I desire”] may be stated as follows: The perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is achieving apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, in a measure corresponding to one’s capacity; and knowing His providence over His creatures [as manifested] in the act of bringing them into being and guiding them; and following the paths of this comprehension with the intent to always perform **kindness, righteousness, and justice, to emulate God’s actions**, as we have explained several times in this treatise. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III, 54)

To sum up, it would seem that extraordinary importance is attached to the practice of righteousness and kindness in our service of God – both as commandments that shape our relationship to the needy and to society at large, and as a way of drawing near to God and walking in His ways.

Returning to our *parasha*, it is important to remember that the laws of charity and aid to the other, including to slaves, appear in many other places in the Torah. Sections expressing concern about slaves also appear in the books of *Shemot* and *Devarim*, and this is not the first time that we are commanded to observe the *shemitta* year. It would seem that the novelty of our *parasha* lies in the comprehensive view that it offers – not discrete commandments, but commandments that shape the character of society as a whole. *Parashat* *Behar* raises the people to a new status, from a society that does *chesed* to a society of *chesed*. We are to be characterized by general concern for the weak in society, providing for them and ensuring that they are not oppressed. The definition of a good, quality society depends on its attitude toward its weakest members, and the Torah demands of us that we be an excellent society.

The prohibition of lending money at interest in our *parasha* attests to this. The Torah does not see a problem with lending at interest per se, for it is permitted to lend to gentiles. The logic behind profit in a loan is quite simple – one rents out money just as one rents out any other object. So why is there such a severe prohibition on making this type of loan to fellow Jews? The Ramban explains:

"You shall not lend upon interest to your brother" (*Devarim* 23:20)… And he explained here that charging interest to a gentile is permissible. This is not mentioned with reference to robbery and theft, as the Rabbis have said: "Theft from a gentile is forbidden" [*Bava Kama* 113b]. But borrowing with interest, which is done with the knowledge and will of both parties, was forbidden only because of brotherliness and kindness, as He commanded: "And you shall love your fellow as yourself" (*Vayikra* 19:18)… Therefore it said [here]: "so that the Lord your God may bless you" (*Devarim* 23:21), for one acts with kindness and compassion for his brother by lending to him without interest, and it will be accounted to him as righteousness*.* The [release of debts in the] *shemitta* year is also an act of kindness among brothers, and therefore it is stated: "Of a foreigner you may exact it" (*Devarim* 15:3), while a blessing is established for him [i.e., one who releases the debt of a brother], for Scripture mentions a blessing only regarding charity and acts of kindness, and not for [the mere abstention from] robbery, theft, and deceit. (Ramban, *Devarim* 23:20)

That is to say, there is no moral problem per se with taking interest, but in economic dealings with our brothers, we must comport ourselves not only in accordance with the letter of the law but also in a spirit of brotherhood and kindness. The Ramban highlights this message in our *parasha* as well, when it explains the prohibition of interest with the statement: "and your brother shall live with you" (*Vayikra* 25:36). The Ramban explains:

The meaning of "and your brother shall live with you" is that he shall [be enabled to] live with you, and it is a positive commandment to support him, and it is from here [that we deduce] that we are commanded by means of a positive commandment to save life. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 25:35)

Part of the general commandment of *pikuach nefesh* and saving the life of our brother involves benevolent and solicitous care for them even in the economic sphere.

**A State of *Chesed***

As we have seen, the pinnacle of the manifestation of God's will in the world is found in the conduct of a society that makes a point of caring for the weak and oppressed. There is good reason to work toward this in the State of Israel as well. Particularly following Yom Ha-atzmaut, when we reflect on the achievements of the state in the realms of security and gross national product, as well as aspirations in these areas, it is appropriate to also speak of achievements in the realm of social welfare, and of things that still need to be rectified in this realm.

Harav Amital *ztz"l* always said that a religious party should demand the health and welfare ministries before demanding the education and religious ministries, because indeed, the main area of action, as we have seen, involves concern for the weak.

*Tehillim* 72 describes an ideal state of the people of Israel, in which the king acts in perfect manner. Indeed, some of the *midrashim* see this psalm as a description of the Mashiach and his future kingdom. The verses of the psalm speak not at all of an army, wealth, or Torah study. A brief perusal of them highlights one clear point:

[A Psalm] of Shlomo. Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the king's son; that he may judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice… May he judge the poor of the people, and save the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor… For he will deliver the needy when he cries; and the poor, who has no helper. He will have mercy on the poor and needy, and the souls of the needy he will save. (*Tehillim* 72:1-13)

It would seem that the principle that the Jewish people should be a light unto the nations (an idea also found in the above psalm) is bound up at its essence with building a world of help for the downtrodden and welfare for the underprivileged. Other nations aspire to emulate the Jewish people in creativity, innovation, and military prowess – but a more complete connection will be made if they attach themselves to the humanitarian and social aspects of the Jewish people as well – and consequently, we are obligated to excel in this.

The above principle can be applied to our personal lives as well, such as in the question of what profession we choose. Do we wish to work at a lucrative job and devote some of our free time to acts of kindness, or do we feel it is more appropriate to choose a profession that is entirely devoted to acts of kindness? Just as there is great value in daily Torah study, but this cannot be compared to a person who sits all day and makes Torah his livelihood, so too there is a considerable gap between becoming a movie star who volunteers at a hospital in his spare time, on the one hand, and working daily as a doctor, on the other.

The imperative of helping others and caring for the weak as part of one's daily routine is found in well-known Talmudic stories. For example, the Gemara in *Rosh* *Ha-shana* relates that Rabba and Abaye both descended from the house of Eli, a lineage that was cursed to die young, yet one of them lived a long life:

Rabba and Abaye were of the house of Eli. Rabba, who involved himself in Torah, lived forty years; Abaye, who involved himself both in Torah and in acts of kindness, lived sixty years. (*Rosh Ha-shana* 18a).

The *Tosafot* there are puzzled by the Gemara's implication that only Abaye engaged in acts of kindness, and therefore lived a longer life, while Rabba did not do so, and therefore died. This is difficult in light of other sources that indicate Rabba, too, attached value to acts of kindness and was active in this realm. The *Tosafot* offer a thought-provoking answer:

You might ask that here it is implied that Rava did not have the merits of practicing kindness, but surely Abaye said to Rabba: “You, master, engage in both Torah study and the practice of kindness” (*Sanhedrin* 98b)! It may be answered that nevertheless, Abaye was more involved [in the practice of kindness] than was Rabba. (*Tosafot*, ad loc., s.v. *Rabba ve-Abaye*)

While Rabba was a man who did much for charity, he died relatively young because he was not a man who was all charity and who devoted his entire life to it, as did Abaye. This idea is brought out with particular force in the story of two of the martyrs:

Our Rabbis taught: When Rabbi Elazar ben Perata and Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon were arrested… Rabbi Chanina said to Rabbi Elazar ben Perata: Happy are you, who have been arrested on five charges, but will be rescued; woe is me, for [though] I was arrested on only one charge, will not be rescued; for you have occupied thyself with [the study of] the Torah as well as with acts of kindness, whereas I occupied myself with Torah alone… But did he not occupy himself with acts of kindness? Surely it has been taught: Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov says: One should not put his money into a charity bag unless it is supervised by a learned man such as Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon! He was indeed very trustworthy, but he did not practice [acts of kindness]. But has it not been taught: He said to him: I mistook Purim money for ordinary charity money, so I distributed [of my own] to the poor! He did indeed practice charity, but not as much as he should have done. (*Avoda Zara* 17b)

Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon was involved in many charitable and benevolent enterprises – he was in charge of the distribution of charity funds and even gave from his own pocket – but he did not practice charity "as much as he should have done." Every person is obligated to invest in helping the weak according to the best of his abilities and capacities, not just to fulfill his minimal responsibility.

To sum up, when faced with a decision between doing kindness in a sporadic and random manner, versus living a life of *chesed* in every sphere of one's being – professionally, in one’s political stance, and in every other area – we can see that our *parasha* takes a very clear stand, and we should strive to act accordingly.

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