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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In memory of Rebbetzin Rebecca Singer *z"l*, wife of Rabbi Joseph Singer *z"l*, daughter of Rabbi Chaim Heller *z"l*, upon her *yahrzeit*, 27 Sivan,
by her daughter Vivian Singer

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### The Ma'apilim – Between Acceptance and Action

Summarized by Shmuel Goldberg

Translated by David Strauss

**The Torah Was Given Only to the Eaters of Manna**

The simple understanding of the story of the sin of the spies is, of course, that the decree that the generation of the wilderness would not enter the Land of Israel was a punishment. We spoke previously of the significance of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness: of the heat, the suffering, the hopelessness. But there is a *Tanna* who did not see the decree not to enter the land as a punishment, and in fact, saw it as something good, desirable, thrilling, and necessary. I speak of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai:

The Holy One, blessed be He, did not bring them by a straight path to the Land of Israel, but through the wilderness, saying: "If I bring Israel to the Land now, they will immediately take possession of their fields and their vineyards and be idle from the Torah. Rather, I will cause them to circle in the wilderness for forty years, so they may eat manna and drink from the well, and the Torah will be absorbed in their bodies. From here, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: The Torah was given to be expounded only by the eaters of manna." (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* 17, 17)

Rabbi Shimon maintains that the forty-year delay in entering the land was a blessing, for without it, the Torah could not have been sustained. Had the Israelites entered the land immediately, Heaven forbid, they would have had to work to support themselves. In the wilderness there was no need for this – they ate manna and drank from the well, and could sit all day and study Torah. The forty years in the wilderness allowed the Israelites to study the entire tractate of *Ketubot*, for instance – to delve into the intricacies of double doubts and halakhic presumptions without having to fulfill what the tractate says, that a husband is obligated to support his wife. In Rabbi Shimon’s view, constant Torah study overrides conquest of the land, inheritance of it, and working it. This position is also found in the Gemara, in a more familiar source:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says: Is it possible that a man plows in the plowing season, and sows in the sowing season, and reaps in the reaping season, and threshes in the threshing season, and winnows in the season of wind – what is to become of the Torah? Rather, when Israel performs the will of God, their work is performed by others, as it is stated: "And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks" (*Yeshayahu* 61:5). And when Israel does not perform the will of God, their work is carried out by themselves, as it is stated: "And you shall gather in your corn" (*Devarim* 11:14). (*Berakhot* 35b)

The notion that anything that pertains to this world is "second class," and should be set aside in favor of the perpetual study of Torah, is familiar to us today from the Charedi community. Some would have us believe that this worldview is a recent innovation, but as we see from the words of Rabbi Shimon, it has existed in the Jewish people for many generations. The connection between the Charedim and Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai is manifested on Lag Ba-omer: when I was a child, they still spoke on Lag Ba-omer about the disciples of Rabbi Akiva and about the Bar Kokhba revolt; over the years, this aspect of Lag Ba-omer has disappeared, and the entire focus has become centered on the figure of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai.

This notion seems so alien to us – is this really what the Torah wants? That we should not engage in advancing civilization, the settlement of the Land of Israel, or the sustenance of our families, but should rather sit all day and learn Torah? In my opinion, to say that this is the will of the Torah is not merely puzzling; it is outrageous! What is the meaning of this perception?

**The End of History**

I would like to suggest an approach, a certain understanding of the context in which Rabbi Shimon said the words quoted above. My understanding is that Rabbi Shimon formulated his approach in the period after the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt. According to today’s estimates, two-thirds of the Jewish people perished in the Bar Kokhba revolt; experts speak of some two and a quarter million people who died, when the Jewish population at that time was likely about three and a half million. Faced by such complete destruction of the people and the land, such a crushing defeat at the hands of the Romans, Rabbi Shimon concluded that the Jewish people were now standing at the end of history. The possibility that three years after such total devastation and annihilation in the crematoria of Europe, a Jewish state could be reborn, flourish and prosper, and become one of the leading nations of the world, did not enter Rabbi Shimon's mind. For him, with the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt the wheels of history ceased to turn; the world stopped progressing and the situation would remain until the Almighty would intervene from above to redeem the world. In the meantime, there was no point in dealing with this world at all, but only to cling to God fully by immersing oneself in Torah day and night, until the end.

If I try to find a parallel to Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai in the days of the European holocaust, the figure of Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, rabbi of Baranovich and author of the *Kovetz Shiurim*, comes to mind – may his blood be avenged and may his merit stand for all Israel. Legend has it – though I do not know the degree of its veracity – that Rav Elchanan had the opportunity to escape but refused, choosing to remain with his students and perish with them. Like Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai in his day, Rav Elchanan saw in the Holocaust the end of history. Thus he writes in the name of his teacher, the Chafetz Chaim:

The Chafetz Chaim further said: “Today, the world is undergoing such momentous upheavals in such a short period of time, developments that formerly took a century or more. We see that the wheel of time is turning at lightning speed. What has God done to us? Why have the circumstances changed?”

And he answered: “Since the days of creation, many accounts have accumulated in the heavens. Before the coming of Mashiach, these accounts must be settled, because then the evil inclination will be nullified, and with it, all worldly affairs that depend and subsist on the battle with the evil inclination will be eliminated. Therefore, it is incumbent upon every individual to pay off what is still owed to Heaven, since the days of Mashiach are very near at hand, and it is imperative to expedite this process.”

Since the Chafetz Chaim *z”l* voiced this opinion – twenty years ago – the pace of events in the world has accelerated, so that what once took generations to unfold now happens overnight. It is as if the wheel of time were being driven at breakneck speed, as if someone were urging it on: Hurry up and make haste. Any reasonable person will conclude from this that we are living in a special era, which is soon to change the whole order of the world, and the pace is increasing daily. (*Kuntrus Ikveta de-Meshicha*, 18)

I am several decades younger than Rav Elchanan and have merited to see things that he did not see. I agree with his assertion that the Messianic era is at hand – I believe it began with the establishment of the State of Israel – but as for his assertion that the evil inclination will be abolished, I can attest for myself that my own inclination has not disappeared. But Rav Elchanan understood that deliverance would soon come from above; therefore, his last words to his students before his death were as follows:

In the heavens we are accounted righteous, apparently, for we have been chosen to atone for the sins of the Jewish people with our bodies. Therefore we must return to God in full repentance, and immediately, in this place… Time is short; the road to the Ninth Fort [the site of the massacre of the Slabodka-Kovno martyrs] is near. We must know that our sacrifices will be more pleasing before God if accompanied by repentance, and thereby we will save the lives of our brothers and sisters in America… Let no tainted thoughts enter our minds, God forbid, for it is like a blemish and disqualifies the sacrifice. We are now fulfilling the greatest mitzva: “With fire You burnt it, and with fire You will rebuild it in the future"[[1]](#footnote-1) – the fire that consumes our bodies is the fire that will rebuild the house of Israel. (From the introduction to the book *Kovetz Shiurim* I)

The proper response to the end of history, according to Rav Elchanan as well as Rabbi Shimon, is to withdraw from the world and to cling absolutely to God. History has come to an end and the question is only how that end is manifested: in the extinction of the Jewish people or in the advent of Mashiach? In such a situation, the Jewish people must not act to advance the situation, but only to cling to God, and the word of God is learned only from studying Torah, not from contemplating history.

This perception still exists in the Charedi world today. At the risk of implying equivalence, I wish to refer to one of Amos Oz's earliest books, *Po ve-Sham be-Eretz Israel*. In one chapter, he describes walking through Me’a Shearim reading the posters and graffiti on the walls, and he notes that the two words that recurred most frequently were – I hesitate to mention the name, especially on Shabbat, but – "Hitler" and, at the other extreme, "Mashiach." Of course, the words appeared in different contexts, but both reflect the Charedi perception of the end of history – the ultimate evil enemy, after which there are no developments in the real world; Mashiach does not come from within the development of history but from outside it, to redeem it.

I attach importance to the Charedi conception of the end of history and clinging to God through constant Torah study, but I disagree on philosophical grounds. So far, I have only opened the subject, and I do not wish to expand upon it here. I mainly wanted to raise the existence of this conception throughout the various generations of the Jewish people, and to present you with two questions: Where does it come from, and where can it lead? These questions are your homework.

**Submission: Desirable or Undesirable?**

I would like to move on to another charged topic in the *parasha*: the sin of the *ma'apilim*, the group of Israelites that went up to the Land of Israel, unauthorized, after the sin of the spies:

And they rose up early in the morning and went up to the top of the mountain, saying: We are here, and we will go up to the place which the Lord has promised, for we have sinned. And Moshe said: Why now do you transgress the commandment of the Lord, when it will not succeed?… But they presumed (*vaya'apilu*)to go up to the top of the mountain; but the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and Moshe, did not depart from within the camp. Then the Amalekite and the Canaanite, who dwelt in that hill-country, came down and smote them and beat them down until Chorma. (*Bamidbar* 14:40-45)

What is the meaning of the term *vaya'apilu*? Onkelos renders it as *ve-arshi’u*, "and they acted wickedly." This interpretation is based on a verse in *Chabakuk* (2:4): "Behold, his soul is puffed up [*upla*], not upright, in him." According to this understanding, the sin of the *ma'apilim* was rooted in stubbornness and wickedness, and there is no room to find any positive aspects in it.

On the other hand, I would like to bring before you the following words of Rav Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin. He wrote the following words approximately in the years of the First Aliya:

And they did not succeed in this because they ate it unripe, as *Chazal* said: "In the footsteps of Mashiach, insolence will increase" (*Sota* 49b), for that will be the time for this. Therefore Moshe said to them: "it will not succeed," implying that it is a plan but one that will not succeed. And to be precise, *Chazal* expound "and it" in all places as “it, but not another one” – that there is another time when it *will* succeed, and that is our time, when we are in the footsteps of Mashiach. (*Tzidkat ha-Tzadik*, 46)

Rav Tzadok had in mind, concretely or almost concretely, the First Aliya: an *aliya* that was no less impertinent – both toward the Turkish regime, which was not at all fond of the newcomers, and to a certain extent toward the decree of exile that hung over the Jewish people for many centuries. My revered teacher Chanan Porat was strongly attached to these words of Rav Tzadok and his interpretation of the *mishna*: "In the footsteps of Mashiach, insolence will increase" (*Sota* 9:15). In my opinion, he took the matter one step too far. I would like to go back and understand exactly what the sin of the *ma'apilim* was, and to draw conclusions from there.

The *ma'apilim* refused to accept God’s decree that they would die in the wilderness and not see the land. But what is the meaning of “accepting” a decree? To what extent is it right to submit and accept a decree, as opposed to trying to change it for the better?

On the one hand, we know Tzidkiyahu was rebuked for his failure to submit: "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God; he did not submit himself before Yirmeyahu, the prophet [speaking] from the mouth of the Lord" (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 36:12). Similarly, Shaul refused to accept the decree that his kingship would pass to David, and his refusal dealt a serious blow to his legacy. Instead of handing over the kingship to his son-in-law through a mutual agreement, with his son Yehonatan serving as David’s viceroy, he insisted on pursuing David – of special note is the attack on Nov, the city of the priests – and in the end, both he and Yehonatan died in battle, while his daughter Michal had a falling-out with David and lost her status as the senior queen and as potential mother of the heir.

On the other hand, we have the seemingly impressive case of Eli, who accepted his fate, responding to Shmuel’s harsh prophecy, that there would be no atonement for the sins of the house of Eli, with but a few words: "It is the Lord; let Him do what seems Him good" (I *Shmuel* 3:18). Yet – it is precisely this attitude that *Chazal* criticize:

How do we know that a final sentence accompanied by an oath is never rescinded? Because it says: "Therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned with sacrifice nor offering" (I *Shmuel* 3:14). Rava said: With sacrifice and offering it cannot be expiated, but it can be expiated with **Torah**. Abaye said: With sacrifice and offering it cannot be expiated, but it can be expiated with **Torah and acts of lovingkindness**. (*Rosh Ha-shana* 18a)

A third opinion is recorded in the *Yerushalmi* (*Sanhedrin* 1:2): "With sacrifice and offering it cannot be expiated, but it can be expiated with **prayer**." Despite God's oath to wipe out the house of Eli, Eli could *and should* have prevented this annihilation by engaging in the three things on which the world stands: Torah, service [i.e., prayer], and acts of lovingkindness (*Avot* 1:2).

We find another case of non-acceptance of a Divine decree in connection with Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, when the prophet Yeshayahu told him that God had decreed he would die. The Gemara relates that Chizkiyahu sought to improve his ways, but Yeshayahu told him that "the decree has already been issued" and that he could not change it. Chizkiyahu's response was:

Son of Amotz, finish your prophecy and go. This tradition I have from the house of my ancestor: Even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck, he should not hold himself back from prayer! (*Berakhot* 10a)

Yeshayahu begins to leave, but while he is still in the middle court, God commands him to go back and inform Chizkiyahu that his prayer has already saved his life, and with it, all of Jerusalem as well. The tradition from the house of his ancestor comes from David: after David’s sin with Batsheva, Natan the prophet tells him that a decree was issued from before God that the child would die, and yet David continues pleading for his life for seven days. Why did David's prayer not succeed in averting the calamity, and why was Chizkiyahu's prayer effective? The best answer is to give no answer. Sometimes God answers our prayers, and sometimes not, and we cannot complain. But in any case, we see that one should indeed pray for the cancellation of a decree.

The best example in the Bible that can be brought to bear in our discussion of submission – so good that if it were not written, it would have had to be invented – is the story of Yoshiyahu. Yoshiyahu hears God's decree written in the Torah, and his first reaction is to rend his garments and submit; as reward for this, God promises him that, the calamity will indeed come, but not in his lifetime:

Because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard what I declared against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they would become a desolation and a curse, and you rent your clothes and wept before Me, I also have heard you, says the Lord. Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. (II *Melakhim* 22:19-20)

But then Yoshiyahu decides to act:

And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and all the men of Yehuda and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the people, from small to great; and he read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant that was found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood on the platform, and made the covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes, with a full heart and a full soul, to fulfill the words of this covenant that were written in this book; and all the people entered into [lit. stood to] the covenant. (Ibid. 23:2-3)

Yoshiyahu renews the covenant with God and leads the people in the destruction of idolatry. He does not accept the status quo but decides to change history. While we know that he was ultimately unsuccessful and the destruction did come, it is very possible that he could have succeeded; what blocked his success in the end came from elsewhere.

**Submitting to the Decree Versus Submitting to the Sin**

And so, when is it desirable to submit before God’s decree and accept His judgment, and when is it proper to act to change the situation? We must distinguish between two types of action: between the attempt to change and rectify the sin, and the desire to change and avert the decree. Repentance and the rectification of sin always have the potential – though they may not always succeed – to reverse the decree, since it is no longer relevant once the sin is removed. But in the case of a Divine decree for a sin that still exists, we must submit to God and accept the judgment He has decreed against us.

The sin of the *ma'apilim* was an intermediate case. Was their action directed against the decree or against the sin? The decree was that the generation of the wilderness would not enter the land, and it came as a result of their lack of willingness to enter it. It is not clear whether it is proper to regard it as a punishment (which should be accepted) or as a sin (which should be rectified).

We must ask this question regarding the present exile as well, and the great authorities of Israel have differed on this point. The straightforward meaning of the "three oaths" is as understood by Rabbi Yoel of Satmar: God decreed that Israel should not rebel against the nations, and therefore we must wait and hope for the coming of Mashiach. Any attempt to return to the Land of Israel on our own is an attempt to change the decree. But I would like to set two figures opposite this understanding of the sin of the *ma'apilim* and the three oaths. The first is Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, author of the *Kuzari*, who was perhaps the first to speak of the need to rise up from the Diaspora and go to the Land of Israel, though he did not speak of the establishment of a state or any other authority. The second is, in my opinion, the father of modern Zionism: the holy *Or Ha-Chaim*, who came from Morocco to the Land of Israel and believed in mass *aliya*. Both of these individuals believed that exile is not a punishment visited upon us, but a problematic reality that we must rectify.

This question is also closely related to the contemporary dilemmas of our conduct in the Land of Israel. I will leave this question open, but would like to refer to one more story from which we have much to learn.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, meeting with Vespasian, gave up on the Temple and instead asked for "Yavneh and its Sages" (*Gittin* 56a). This was no simple decision, and there were those among the Sages who criticized it: "Rav Yosef, and some say it was Rabbi Akiva, applied to him the verse: '[God] turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish’ (*Yeshayahu* 46:25)" (ibid.). Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai himself wondered on his deathbed whether he had made the right decision: he describes to his students that "there are two paths before me, one to the Garden of Eden and one to *Gehinom*, but I do not know down which they are leading me" (*Berakhot* 28a). Clearly, Rabban Yochanan was not afraid that he would go to *Gehinom* for nothing; he was afraid that his decision to give up the Temple might have been wrong, and that he would thereby lose his place in the world to come. So what was behind his decision?

I do not think that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai submitted to God's decree that the Temple would be destroyed. Unlike in the book of *Yirmeyahu*, they did not know at the time of the Second Temple whether such a decree existed. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was not a prophet; no one whispered in his ear that a decree had been issued, and the rightness of his decision was disputed in the *beit midrash*. I also do not believe that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai acted as a shrewd politician and sought Yavneh and its Sages based on his assessment that there was no hope for the Jews of Jerusalem to hold out against the Roman legions. If, on the second day of the Yom Kippur War, we had made decisions like a prudent politician, we would have given up the Golan Heights in a "give me Yavneh and its Sages" decision or at least a "give me Tiberias and its Sages" decision.

Rather, I believe that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai looked at the Jews of Jerusalem and said: "With these people, I cannot go out to war." He realized that the Jews of Jerusalem could not create a unified force against the Romans, as they thought the internal threat from the rival sect was greater than the threat from the outside enemy – and thus, they would clearly have no chance against the empire that was closing in on them.

Even today, when I think about our battle for Jerusalem – and I mean by that the struggle for all of the Land of Israel – I look at the infighting among the people of Israel and tremble. I do not blame either side; it is typical of quarrels that both sides are to blame. How are we to solve the problem and progress from here? I pose this question to you and leave it open. "May the Lord pardon everyone" (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 30:18), and may He answer us and show us the correct path by which we can move forward.

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

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. From the *Nacheim* prayer recited at *Mincha* on Tisha Be-Av, based on *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 4:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)