YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Meir Shpiegelman**

**PARASHAT SHELACH**

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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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**Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael**

Following the episode of the spies in the first two chapters of *Parashat Shelach* (*Bamidbar* 13-14), the Torah mentions a few laws whose connection with the narrative is not immediately apparent: *minchat nesachim* (below, *nesachim* – libations), *challa*, and the sin offering. We then encounter the story of the man who gathered wood on Shabbat, and chapter 15 closes with a fourth commandment, that of *tzitzit*.

This *shiur* will focus on the connection between the story of the spies, which is the main focus of our *parasha*, and the laws mentioned at its end.

**Forty Years of Wandering**

In response to the sin of the spies, God decrees that Bnei Yisrael will wander in the wilderness for forty years – from our *parasha* until the end of *Sefer Bamidbar*. However, the Torah does not chronicle what happened throughout those forty years, and this lack of orderly documentation impairs our understanding of some of the incidents that are recorded in the text, such as the story of Korach. The question of at what point during Bnei Yisrael’s wanderings Korach’s rebellion against Moshe and Aharon took place is essential to understanding his sin.

We can find textual support for the view that the episode of Korach happened at the end of the forty years, as well as for the view that it took place in the middle of that period. It is possible that *Parashat Chukat*, which sets forth the laws of impurity relating to a dead body, refers to the forty years during which the generation that left Egypt was wandering in the wilderness and gradually dying out. If this is the case, then it would seem that Korach rebelled at the beginning of the forty years (since *Parashat Korach* precedes *Parashat* *Chukat*). However, it is also possible that the Torah refers backto the forty years at the end of our *parasha*, with the words, “*And [while] Bnei Yisrael were in the wilderness*, they found a man collecting wood on Shabbat” (*Bamidbar* 15:32). If so, then Korach’s rebellion, recorded in next week’s *parasha*, came only after this – in other words, at the *end* of the forty years.

God willing, we will address the chronological question of Korach and his faction in next week’s *shiur*, but the same question arises concerning the concluding units of our *parasha*. The very last unit of our *parasha* – *tzitzit* – is easy to connect to the spies: the Torah states that the purpose of *tzitzit* is so that “you will not go about after your heart and after your eyes, after which you go astray” (15:39) – which, of course, is exactly what the spies did.[[1]](#footnote-1) This indicates that the entire *parasha* constitutes one unit, with all of its *mitzvot* connecting somehow to the spies. Moreover, if the introductory phrase, “And [while] Bnei Yisrael were in the wilderness…” refers to the forty years of wandering, then the three *mitzvot* immediately preceding this verse are presumably connected somehow to the story of the spies.

On the simplest level, we might propose that the connection between the story of the spies and the three *mitzvot* that follow it concerns their relationship with Eretz Yisrael. The three *mitzvot* are introduced with the words, “When you come to the land of your habitations which I give to you…” (*Bamidbar* 15:2). It seems that the Torah is offering encouragement to Bnei Yisrael, who were just dealt the immense blow of the decree of wandering for 40 years and who may be thinking or feeling that the Promised Land will never become a reality. These *mitzvot* assure them that Bnei Yisrael will in fact reach the land, and they will offer sacrifices there. However, as we shall see below, there is also a more substantive connection that goes much deeper than just the introductory phrase.

**A Sin Offering for Violating “the Entire Torah”**

Three commandments are given to Bnei Yisrael after the sin of the spies: the libations accompanying the sacrifices, the separation of *challa*, and the sin offering. As we shall see, these commandments represent a fundamental change from the preceding reality, and we must try to understand why God gave these commandments specifically on the heels of the episode of the spies.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Let us first consider the third mitzva in this series – the special sacrifice that is offered for unintentional transgression of “all the commandments”:

And when you err and do not perform **all of these commandments** which the Lord spoke to Moshe…. (*Bamidbar* 15:22)

Since it is clearly impossible to transgress all of the commandments simultaneously, we might offer two interpretations of what the Torah is saying here. First, it may be describing a **communal** transgression of **one** of the *mitzvot*. According to this interpretation, this verse should be read like the verses describing the sin offering at the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*:

And if the whole congregation of Israel errs, the thing being hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do **one** of all of God’s commandments which shall not be done, and they are guilty…. (*Vayikra* 4:13)

Admittedly, if we embrace this understanding of the verse, it is difficult to discern a difference between mistakes of the collective or of the individual in our *parasha*, and the mistakes of the collective or of the individual in *Parashat Vayikra*.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, the next verse uses the expression, “all of God’s commandments” (15:23), which seems to emphasize the difference between our *parasha* and *Parashat Vayikra*. Moreover, the Torah uses similar words in the unit on *tzitzit* (“and you shall remember **all of God’s commandments**,” 15:39), and the *tzitzit* are certainly meant to remind us of all the commandments, not just one of them.

A second possible interpretation is that the Torah is referring here to a person who transgresses a prohibition that is considered equivalent to all the *mitzvot*.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to this understanding, the sacrifice for an unintentional sin is directly connected to the story of the spies.

How so? Several sources convey the idea that the primary fulfillment of the *mitzvot* is in Eretz Yisrael – not only the *mitzvot* that are dependent on the land, but all of the *mitzvot*. In the *berit bein ha-betarim*, God twice promises Avraham that He will be his God and the God of his descendants:

And I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and your seed after you, throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, **to be a God to you and to your seed after you**. And I will give you, and your seed after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; **and I will be their God**. (*Bereishit* 17:7-8)

It seems that the repetition of the promise “to be a God to you” hints that the relationship between God and Am Yisrael is different when the nation is in exile from when they are in their land. This idea finds very clear expression in David’s words to Shaul:

For they have driven me out this day from attachment to the inheritance of the Lord, saying: Go, serve other gods. (I *Shmuel* 26:19)

Being driven out of the land is tantamount to being sent to worship other gods.[[5]](#footnote-5) We can therefore understand that the moment Bnei Yisrael forgo entering the land, they are considered as having transgressed all the *mitzvot* of the Torah.

According to this understanding, the law of the sacrifice for an unintentional transgression teaches Bnei Yisrael the severity of the sin of the spies from a different perspective, in addition to God’s rebuke after the sin. The uniqueness of this unit lies in its emphasis that despite the severe transgression, the gates of repair are not locked, and that which has deviated and become distorted may be repaired through a sin offering.

Continuing the same line of thought, the unit on *tzitzit* complements the unit on the sacrifice for an unintentional transgression, since the role of the *tzitzit* is to prevent the recurrence of an incident like the sin of the spies. In this context, the *tzitzit* actually serve a dual role: on one hand, they stand counter to the sin of the spies, as explained above; on the other hand, *tzitzit* is given to Am Yisrael in response to the desecration of Shabbat in the episode of the gatherer of sticks.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The Libations**

Backing up to the beginning of chapter 15, the first mitzva that appears after the sin of the spies is the requirement to include *nesachim* (libations) along with the sacrifices. This is a new mitzva; while the Torah had previously mentioned the possibility of various meal offerings accompanying sacrifices, there was no all-inclusive obligation to bring libation offerings. The mitzva applies to any individual bringing a burnt offering or peace offering to the *Mishkan*.

Which species are fit to be brought as *nesech*? In *Parashat Eikev*, we find the well-known verse extolling the produce of Eretz Yisrael:

A land of wheat and barley and grapes and figs and pomegranates; a land of oil olives and honey. (*Devarim* 8:8)

It turns out that the species chosen as *nesachim* are those that appear in the above verse immediately after the word *eretz* (“land of…”): wheat and olive oil.[[7]](#footnote-7) Wine (grapes), which is further removed from the word *eretz,* serves only as a libation but is not brought as an offering in its own right,[[8]](#footnote-8) while honey (dates), the species furthest removed from the word *eretz*, may not be offered upon the altar at all. *Chametz*, which represents human action, is likewise (conceptually) removed from *eretz* and is therefore forbidden upon the altar.

We see, then, that the purpose of bringing libations with a sacrifice is to connect the sacrifice with Eretz Yisrael. Am Yisrael rejected the land, raising the possibility of Divine service unconnected to Eretz Yisrael, and God responds with the commandment of libations and their symbolic message: just as there is no offering of sacrifices without libations, so there can be no offering of sacrifices without a connection to Eretz Yisrael.

Indeed, the laws of libations point to a strong connection between them and the land. A sin offering points to the existence of sin, a reality that is (conceptually) impossible in Eretz Yisrael (since the land “vomits” sinners); hence, there are no libations for a sin offering.[[9]](#footnote-9) Moreover, prior to our *parasha*, libations were mentioned in relation to two sacrifices: the *omer* and the offering of Shavuot. Both of these express thanksgiving to God for the land, hence they were commanded as entailing libations even before this requirement was applied to other sacrifices. This is also why the Torah has to emphasize that the obligation of libations applies both to the native-born and to converts. We might have thought that someone who has converted to Judaism would be exempt from the requirement to bring libations since he has no portion in Eretz Yisrael. The Torah therefore emphasizes explicitly that he, too, is obligated with regard to the relevant libations.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Separation of *Challa***

I have mentioned in the past that there is a strong connection between the sanctity of man and the sanctity of the land, and the Torah often binds them together. Therefore, following the commandment of the libations, which symbolize the sanctity of the land, the Torah goes on to command the separating of *challa* – which symbolizes the sanctity of man.

Bread symbolizes human action in many different places.[[11]](#footnote-11) The message arising from this unit is that just as holiness pertains to that which grows from the ground, so it pertains to man’s actions. The Torah draws a parallel between *challa*, which is brought from bread dough, and the *teruma* that is brought from grain:

Of the first of your dough, you shall set apart (*tarimu*) *challa* as a gift (*teruma*); like the gift (*teruma*) from the threshing floor, so shall you set it apart (*tarimu*). (*Bamidbar* 15:20)

Hence, the significance of the commandment of *challa* is that Bnei Yisrael’s rejection of Eretz Yisrael does not only destroy the possibility of serving God through the sacrifices, but it also fractures the sanctity of man. *Tzitzit* also relates directly to the sanctity of man, since it includes *tekhelet*, which symbolizes the holiness of the *Mishkan*, as discussed in a previous *shiur*.

The episode of Korach, which follows directly after our *parasha*, is a direct continuation of the unit on *challa*. Korach argues that “the entire congregation, they are all holy” – meaning, he bases his argument on the holiness of man. At its root, this argument is correct, and Korach learns it from our *parasha*; specifically, the unit on *challa* and the unit on *tzitzit*.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Returning to the Gatherer**

In light of the above explanation, we can also understand the story of “the gatherer.” After the Torah repeatedly emphasizes that the obligation of *mitzvot* applies principally in Eretz Yisrael, it comes as no surprise that this man starts gathering sticks in the wilderness on Shabbat. The Torah introduces the incident with the words “And [while] Bnei Yisrael were in the wilderness…” because this itself is the root of and background to the sin of the gatherer.

In this sense, the source of his sin is similar to that of the *ma’apilim* – those who, following the sin of the spies and God’s declaration of the forty years of wandering as punishment, head off on their own initiative (and contrary to Moshe’s warning) towards Eretz Yisrael. The *ma’apilim* seek to enter the land without Divine license, and the gatherer demonstrates a similar defiance, declaring that so long as God does not fulfill His promise and bring Bnei Yisrael into the land, there is no obligation to fulfill His commandments.

Despite the ideological justification proposed above for the sin of the gatherer, it is clear that he is not an unintentional sinner. In the verse preceding the story, the Torah emphasizes that someone who acts brazenly and defiantly is a blasphemer – and there is more than a hint here to the sin of the gatherer. Just as the blasphemer mentioned in *Parashat Emor* acts willfully, so does the gatherer in our *parasha*, and just as the story of the blasphemer is juxtaposed with the command concerning Shabbat, so the episode of the gatherer is juxtaposed in our *parasha* to blaspheming God. Just as the blasphemer is mentioned in *Parashat Emor*, which deals with the holiness of the land and of man, so the sin of the gatherer fundamentally flows from the same root: an assault on the connection between the sanctity of man, the sanctity of the land, and the sanctity of Shabbat.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. In fact, the Torah uses the verb *z-n-h* (harlotry, going astray) in both contexts: regarding *tzitzit*,“…after which you go astray (*zonim*)”; and regarding the sin of the spies, “your children will wander in the wilderness for forty years and they shall bear your going astray (*zenuteikhem*)” (*Bamidbar* 14:33). We will also see further connections below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While we of course accept that the Torah will never be replaced, there are a number changes in the laws during the period of the wilderness, before the Torah is codified for transmission. One prominent example is the law of eating meat simply for enjoyment, rather than in the context of a sacrifice; this was permitted to Bnei Yisrael only upon entering the land, but was forbidden in the wilderness. Another example is eating the meat of a *neveila* (an animal that died of natural causes rather than ritual slaughter), which was permissible in the wilderness but was prohibited upon entry into the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We might say that the sacrifice of the individual is mentioned here because of the change that is described regarding a mistake on the part of the collective, and perhaps to highlight that the sin offering of the collective is henceforth a goat, rather than a lamb. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is how *Chazal* explain the verse; see Ramban. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ramban famously explains the words of the prophet, “Set yourself waymarks…” (*Yirmiyahu* 31:21) to mean that the commandments should be observed even in exile, so as to keep their memory and practice alive in anticipation of the eventual return to the land (Ramban *Vayikra* 18:25, *Devarim* 11:18). [Editor’s note: Ramban’s commentary to Vayikra 18:25 includes the midrashic assertion that “settling the land of Israel is equivalent to all the *mitzvot* of the Torah.”] To this we might add that in the pagan mindset, every god had his own “area of influence,” outside of which he had no power. Underlying this perception is the (true) idea that there is a special area where the Divine Presence is revealed; the mistake lies in the lack of understanding that God’s rule extends over all of existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. a. The introductory formula preceding the mitzva of *tzitzit*, "And God said to Moshe, saying [lit. "to say"]" (15:37), appears infrequently in the Torah, and in every instance, it indicates that the content that follows is connected to the preceding unit. Thus, for example, after the daughters of Tzelofchad present their case, Moshe tells them he will inquire of God, and this is immediately followed by the formula, "And God said to Moshe, saying.” Hence, it is possible that this introduction to the unit on *tzitzit* indicates a connection between this command and the episode of the man gathering sticks on Shabbat that immediately precedes it.

   b. Along with the connection between *tzitzit* and Shabbat, there is also a connection between the *tzitzit* and the *Mishkan* (the word "*tzitzit*" recalls the "*tzitz*" – forehead plate – worn by the *Kohen Gadol*, and both include a thread of *tekhelet*). Since the connection between Shabbat and the *Mishkan* is clear, we find that Shabbat, the *Mishkan*, and *tzitzit* represent a triad of holiness reflecting the three dimensions of holiness in the world: holiness of time, holiness of place, and holiness of man. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The order in which *berakhot* should be recited over different types of food is derived in accordance with the proximity of each species to the word "*eretz*.” Our *parasha* clarifies that the species mentioned in juxtaposition to the *second* appearance of the word *eretz* take precedence over those mentioned in juxtaposition to the first appearance: olive oil is an offering in its own right, while wine serves only as an auxiliary libation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Barley is used for the offering of an individual who has sinned (such as the offering of a *sota*) and is therefore not brought as any form of *nesech*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There are no libations for offerings of fowl, either, since – as I have mentioned in the past, including in the *shiur* on *Parashat Noach* – birds represent an intermediate level between the sea and dry land, and thus are not essentially bound up with Eretz Yisrael. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Similarly, the native-born and the convert are emphasized when it comes to the Pesach sacrifice; there too, we might have thought that someone who has converted would be exempt from the sacrifice that expresses thanksgiving for the Exodus from Egypt – an event that did not involve his forefathers. There are other similar examples, but I shall not elaborate further here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In a midrashic anecdote [*Midrash Tanchuma* 5], the question of whether man’s actions or God’s actions are finer finds expression in the comparison of bread to wheat. The same idea is expressed in the Torah in the comparison between the *omer* offering and the offering of the two loaves on Shavuot. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is one of the reasons *Chazal* connect Korach’s criticism of Moshe with the unit on *tzitzit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)