**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**CHANUKA 5781**

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Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky z"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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Dedicated in memory of Abraham Gontownik z"l   
on the occasion of his twenty-first Yahrzeit, 

The Gontownik Family

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**“To Distinguish Between the Impure and the Pure”**

**Based on a sicha by**

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The Rambam introduces his Laws of Chanuka with a brief summary of the historical background to the miracle, the miracle itself, and its ramifications for the future. One sentence in this summary describes the Greeks’ invasion of the Temple, the epicenter of sanctity in Israel:

And they entered the Sanctuary, wrought havoc [lit., “created breaches”] within it, and rendered the pure [vessels] impure.

This was an act of violation on two levels: physical destruction and defilement of the sacred. Consequently, our struggle against this attack encompasses both dimensions. The contrast between the two violations is clear. The ripping of partitions within the Temple is immediately apparent and shocking – an area that was once closed-off and hidden is now exposed for all to see; however, when it comes to defilement, we are dealing with something that is altogether intangible. It is a metaphysical, halakhic category that cannot be seen or felt. In halakhic terms, we might define the tearing of the partitions as “*hezek nikar*” – the infliction of direct, physical damage – in the clearest sense, while the defilement of holy objects is one of the three most prominent types of damage that is considered “*hezek she-eino nikar*” – damage that is not discernible.

Our struggle therefore concerns both “*hezek nikar*” and “*hezek she-eino nikar.*” However, the approach is different for each. In terms of repairing the ruptures and fixing the breaches, we engage in rehabilitation and rebuilding. Here the strategy and the task are simple. Where there is a breach, it must be fixed; where there is destruction, there must be rehabilitation; where there are ruins, we must rebuild.

When it comes to defilement, where the damage is not discernible, the process of purification undertaken in response is likewise less discernible and less clear. On the one hand, we might say that defilement, precisely because it falls under the category of “*hezek* *she-eino nikar*,” is especially dangerous. There are cultural, ethical, and philosophical ideas and phenomena that seem similar to and compatible with a Jewish worldview and lifestyle, and we find ourselves wondering where exactly the boundary lies. These can be far more dangerous than ideas that are clearly opposed to or incompatible with Torah, and we need deeper understanding, sharper insight, and greater determination in combatting such ideas.

On the other hand, although the danger may be greater, our response may require an approach other than direct combat. When addressing physical breaches and “*hezek nikar*,” the response is a clear and determined effort in the opposite direction: rebuilding, fixing, repair. When we turn our efforts to combatting defilement, however, we must engage in purification, and that is a multifaceted process.

We naturally associate Chanuka with a sense of conflict and struggle. Indeed, the events that we commemorate entailed a harsh conflict, one that in a sense continues to our day. One might see this conflict as a struggle to the end, in which we aim to destroy, uproot, and shatter the forces arrayed against us. One response to the Greek culture and the “evil kingdom” (in the words of “*Al Ha-Nissim*”) that represented it is to view it as a hostile enemy that should be erased entirely from our midst.

However, there is another point of view, one that exercises discernment in its response. We might seek a way to distinguish between the pure and the impure.

A person who views Greek culture, and the Western culture that to a considerable extent developed from it, as an entity that is altogether negative has an easy time. Such a person can hold forth with fiery conviction on the need for “pure olive oil” in which there is no negotiation, no discourse, nor any connection with that general culture around us.

But one who views Greek culture as a source of meaningful spiritual inspiration, a powerful culture that has positive elements, too – not just the hostile force that invaded and defiled, but also a source of much that is good, beautiful, and proper in the Western world – such a person has a much more difficult and complicated task. The influence of Yefet, the son of Noach, whose name recalls beauty (*yofi, yefefiyut*), is not limited to the evil and barbarous horde that tore apart partitions and defiled holy things. It also extends to peoples and movements that have built up much of the world we live in – the great figures of literature, the outstanding historians, the thinkers who laid the foundations of Western philosophy. One who wishes to recall all this even during Chanuka has a more difficult, dangerous, and demanding task. Such a person does not see Greek culture as pure, unadulterated evil; rather, he or she perceives a mixture of pure and impure, and seeks to distinguish and separate them.

The Torat Kohanim, quoted by Rashi on the verse “To distinguish between the impure and the pure” (*Vayikra* 11:47), teaches that the distinction between impure and pure can be as subtle as distinguishing between an animal that was slaughtered properly and one where the act of slaughtering did not quite encompass the majority of the area required for kosher slaughter. The spiritual effort that this entails is enormous. It is exceedingly difficult to define and understand what portion of the whole must be opposed with all our being and what portion we should seek to understand and perhaps even adopt for ourselves. Indeed, this is a most difficult and complex task.

Nevertheless, to the extent that we are aware that systematic attention to and study of the foundations of linguistics, logic, political science, and social science have their roots in that same culture that brought upon us such destruction, the need to distinguish between that which is hateful and abominable in that world and that which is positive and valuable becomes a necessity.

All this applies not only to Chanuka, but also to the path of our *yeshiva*. I have noted in the past that what characterizes our *yeshiva* above all else – the quality to which its achievements and failures alike can be traced – is its commitment to complexity.

First, there is the structural complexity of the *Hesder* framework itself. Our dual commitment to Torah study and army service can often entail feeling of contrast and even clash.

Another aspect of complexity finds expression in the balance between the Torah aspect and general aspect of our lives, the relationship between the holy and the profane.

A third facet of this complexity pertains to our attitude towards the State of Israel and towards the community in which we live. On the one hand, we feel a profound identification with the state and a powerful sense, based on an ethical and moral consciousness no less than an historical one, of its significance and of the turning point in the history of the Jewish People that it symbolizes. On the other hand, from a purely Torah-based point of view, we have to be able to engage in critical thinking and assess what the state has, what it lacks, and what we would like it to have.

Yet another level of complexity is rooted in our attitude towards modern culture and society in general, including its fundamentally secular nature and all its various shades and colors.

Again, someone who takes a one-dimensional approach to these phenomena (the IDF, the state, the secular world, modern culture), whether embracing them unquestioningly or rejecting them out of hand, has an easier time defining his worldview and his values. But someone who tries to understand their complexity, taking a view that is both encompassing and dialectical, faces a far more difficult challenge on the both the personal and the social level.

The key to navigating all these challenges is to look at the place of Torah in our lives. “For they [the words of Torah] are our lives and the length of our days” – this is the basis, the foundation. Still, we must ask: To what extent do we view the Torah as all-inclusive, central, influencing and nourishing all else, while still leaving room for other spheres that we recognize as having value and meaning for the life of a *ben Torah*?

At the *yeshiva*, we uphold a dual message with regard to these challenges. On the one hand, we passionately emphasize the value and importance of Torah and the need for unceasing Torah study. On the other hand, we proclaim the value – not only pragmatic but also axiological – of other spheres. Indeed, I say this openly: We broadcast what might be understood as a dual message. However, the duality is not to be viewed as contradictory. Rather, it is a reflection of our complex and complicated reality.

The words of R. Shimon bar Yochai in the Yerushalmi (*Shabbat* 1:1) are never far from my mind:

R. Shimon bar Yochai said: Had I stood at Mount Sinai at the time when the Torah was given to Israel, I would have asked the Holy One, blessed be He, to create every person with two mouths – one with which to engage in Torah study, and the other with which to engage in his own affairs.

Of course, this is a fantasy, but what a wonderful fantasy! What a profound and penetrating insight into the human condition, which R. Shimon bar Yochai recognized in his own experience.

The reality is that a person is given but a single mouth, which must perform different functions. But this does not mean that each of these functions is only half-important or requires only half of our attention and commitment. Our engagement in Torah must be wholehearted, with all our being. And even with the awareness that factually speaking we have other needs that are important and meaningful, R. Shimon bar Yochai’s wondrous dream never leaves us, and we must never allow it to. “For they are our life and the length of our days.”

So, on the one hand, we say: Torah should encompass all our being. The mouth is holy in its entirety. On the other hand, we know that there are other needs and purposes that are served by that same mouth. We recognize that there are other spheres that have legitimacy and importance. Some spheres may accord with the world of Torah – though these spheres might have other sources, nevertheless they may be pulled into the orbit of Torah and become subservient to it, like rice that is included in wheat flour dough and turns into bread. But there are also other spheres, other needs, which are simply part of reality and demand our attention.

In terms of our worldview, we may not let go of the dream and aspiration for unadulterated, undivided Torah study. On the practical level, we have to weigh each sphere on its own merits. That which is of value and significance is deserving of time and effort.

This dual message was not invented by Yeshivat Har Etzion or by its *roshei yeshiva*. It is our legacy and heritage. King David, who authored most of *Sefer Tehillim*, was also a king and military leader, a Prime Minister and Minister of Defense all in one. And who could express more eloquently than King David our yearning for the dream and vision of R. Shimon bar Yochai? “One thing I ask of God, it is my request: that I might sit in God’s House all the days of my life, to behold God’s pleasantness and to frequent His Sanctuary” (*Tehillim* 27:4).

I remember that in one of the early years of the yeshiva, Prof. Nechama Leibowitz came and delivered a *shiur* – penetrating as always – on this chapter of *Tehillim*. Upon reaching the above verse, she drew attention to this exclusive focus: “Just ‘one thing I ask’? What about all the rest?” Her point was well taken, but with all due respect to Prof. Leibowitz, this verse is a key part of our heritage and our legacy. King David was well aware that sometimes one has to be on the battlefield, that there has to be an economy, that we have to navigate social and national challenges. But even when he was on the battlefield and even when he sat on his royal throne, he never forsook the dream of “one thing I ask.” In the realm of our requests, wishes, dreams, and ideals, there is only “one thing” that I ask, and I ask it wholeheartedly, with all my being.

Practically speaking, of course there has to be some compromise. Ideologically, David understood the need to devote himself to Torah, but at the same time he knew that there was “another mouth,” which took in and swallowed things that the first mouth would have to help to digest and sort through for what might prove nourishing.

This decision – the need for “a third source that decides between the two” mouths, that chooses the correct balance between the two aspects of the message – is difficult. It is difficult for the *yeshiva* as a *yeshiva*, and it is certainly difficult for each individual. Some decisions can be applied across the board, to the entire yeshiva body, by means of a policy dictated “from above” – for example, the division between the period of yeshiva study and military service. However, there are certainly areas in which the practical, operative balance between the two “mouths” is up to the individual. And this is not easy. Not everyone is capable of taking in a double message. A dialectical view is more complex and more difficult to deal with than a simple, one-dimensional view. But since the *yeshiva*’s earliest days, when Rav Amital set its course, that has been our path.

This month [i.e., Kislev 5749, December 1989] we marked twenty years since the yeshiva’s founding. The twentieth year has halakhic significance; full maturity is reached at the age of twenty. In addition, twenty is the age when a person may be judged. It is the age when a person assumes full responsibility for his actions. A person is judged according to *dinei shamayim* from his twentieth year onwards. Thus, we have reached a state of full maturity and a full assumption of responsibility. At such a stage, it is appropriate to look back and reassess where we have been and where we have come to. The early years of the yeshiva were full of youthful enthusiasm and daring, but there comes a time when one has to take a deep and sometimes painful look at the situation and decide whether to make do with what is or whether there is a need to change direction. One has to take an honest look and see things as they are.

Looking back, the *yeshiva* has many achievements in many areas; this is not the place to list them. At the same time, there is also unquestionably – at least in my opinion – a failure. The depth of commitment to and striving for Torah are unsatisfactory. And when it comes to what happens after *yeshiva*, whether in terms of worldview or in terms of lifestyle, there is also, unfortunately, an erosion of the level of investment in in-depth learning and connection to Torah, when students leave the *yeshiva* and head to the expanses of life outside.

Perhaps this state of affairs calls for a move to messages that are simple to absorb and apply. Perhaps the gap between aspiration and accomplishment is too wide. Perhaps we entertained ourselves with a vision that was too ambitious to be attainable. Can we and should we clip the edges of the wings that we spread so far and so high in the enthusiasm and daring of our younger days?

I sometimes entertain such thoughts when I look at our reality, but in the depths of my heart, I hope and pray that this is not what will happen. I hope and pray that the ability to dream, and the realization of the dream, will remain our aspiration and our portion.

As part of the celebrations of Israel’s twentieth anniversary in 1968, I was invited to address a group of students in New York on the topic of “Israel at Twenty – Poetry and Reality.” I discussed the proper balance between the great dream and its transformation into prosaic reality, with all of the attendant ethical and psychological challenges. Among other things, I quoted two lines from Wordsworth’s *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*: “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” In my heart of hearts, I want to believe that the ability to sustain the vision and the dream, to aspire and to act on a grand and complex scale – those guidelines that have informed us thus far – will continue to guide us, and that the sense that we have not achieved all that we wanted will not lead us to constrict our vision and our aspirations. We shall continue to adhere to the great vision, with complete faith, with the hope on the one hand of deepening our connection to Torah and learning its secrets, in the spirit of “One thing I ask,” and on the other hand having the ability to address all aspects of the complex reality in which the Holy One, blessed be He, has planted us.

(This *sicha* delivered on Chanuka 5749 [1988].)