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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

There is one aspect of Christianity that Jews, if we are to be honest, must reject, and that Christians, most notably Pope John XXIII, have begun to reject. It is the concept of rejection itself, the idea that Christianity represents God's rejection of the Jewish people, the "old Israel".

This is known technically as Supersession or Replacement Theology, and it is enshrined in such phrases as the Christian name for the Hebrew Bible, "The Old Testament." The Old Testament means the testament, or covenant, once in force but no longer. On this view, God no longer wants us to serve Him the Jewish way, through the 613 commandments, but a new way, through a New Testament. His old chosen people were the physical descendants of Abraham. His new chosen people are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, in other words, not Jews but Christians.

The results of this doctrine were devastating. They were chronicled after the Holocaust by the French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac. More recently, they have been set out in works like Rosemary Ruether's Faith and Fratricide, and James Carroll's Constantine's Sword. They led to centuries of persecution and to Jews being treated as a pariah people. Reading Jules Isaac's work led to a profound metanoia or change of heart on the part of Pope John XXIII, and ultimately to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the declaration Nostra Aetate, which transformed relations between the Catholic Church and the Jews.

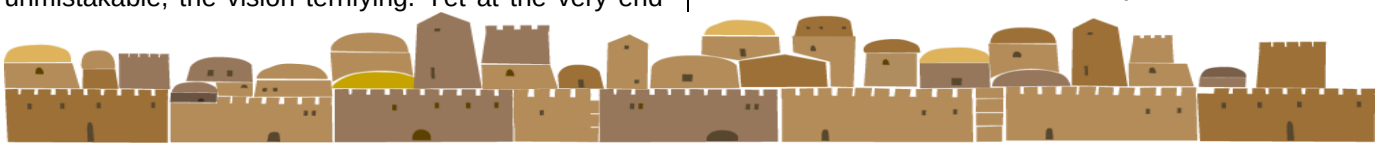
I don't want to explore the tragic consequences of this belief here, but rather its untenability in the light of the sources themselves. To our surprise, they key statement occurs in perhaps the darkest passage of the entire Torah, the curses of Bechukotei. Here in the starkest possible terms are set out the consequences of the choices the people Israel makes. If they stay faithful to God they will be blessed. But if they are faithless the results will be defeat, devastation, destruction and despair. The rhetoric is relentless, the warning unmistakable, the vision terrifying. Yet at the very end come these utterly unexpected lines: "And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord." (Lev. 26:44-45)

The people may be faithless to God but God will never be faithless to the people. He may punish them but he will not abandon them. He may judge them harshly but he will not forget their ancestors, who followed Him, nor will he break the covenant he made with them. God does not break His promises even if we break ours.

The point is fundamental. The Talmud describes a conversation between the Jewish exiles in Babylon and a prophet: "Samuel said: Ten men came and sat down before the prophet. He told them, 'Return and repent.' They answered, 'If a master sells his slave, or a husband divorces his wife, has one a claim upon the other' Then the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the prophet, 'Go and say to them, Thus says the Lord, 'Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.'" (Isaiah 50:1; Sanhedrin 105a)

The Talmud places in the mouths of the exiles an argument later repeated by Spinoza, that the very fact of exile terminated the covenant between God and the Jewish people. God had rescued them from Egypt and thereby become, in a strong sense, their only sovereign, their king. But now, having allowed them to suffer exile, He had abandoned them and they were now under the rule of another king, the ruler of Babylon. It was as if He had sold them to another master, or as if Israel were a wife God had divorced. Having sold or divorced them, God could have no further claim on them.

It is precisely this that the verse in Isaiah-"Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you"-denies. God has not divorced, sold or abandoned His people. That too is the meaning of the promise at the end of the curses of Bechukotai: "And yet for all that, when



they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away... and break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God." God may send his people into exile but they remain his people, and he will bring them back.

This too is the meaning of the great prophecy in Jeremiah: "This is what the Lord says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, / who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, / who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar -- / the Lord Almighty is his name: / 'Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,' declares the Lord, / 'will Israel ever cease being a nation before me.' / This is what the Lord says:???Only if the heavens above can be measured / and the foundations of the earth below be searched out / will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' / declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 31:35-37)

A central theme of the Torah, and of Tanakh as a whole, is the rejection of rejection. God rejects humanity, saving only Noah, when he sees the world full of violence. Yet after the Flood He vows: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). That is the first rejection of rejection.

Then comes the series of sibling rivalries. The covenant passes through Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau. But God hears Hagar's and Ishmael's tears. Implicitly he hears Esau's also, for He later commands, "Do not hate an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Esau] because he is your brother" (Deut 23:7).

Finally God brings it about that Levi, one of the children Jacob curses on his deathbed, "Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel" (Gen. 49:6), becomes the father of Israel's spiritual leaders, Moses, Aaron and Miriam. From now on all Israel are chosen. That is the second rejection of rejection.

Even when Israel suffer exile and find themselves "in the land of their enemies" they are still the children of God's covenant, which He will not break because God does not abandon His people. They may be faithless to Him. He will not be faithless to them. That is the third rejection of rejection, stated in our parsha, reiterated by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, axiomatic to our faith in a God who keeps His promises.

Thus the claim on which Replacement or Supersession theology is based- that God rejects His people because they rejected Him-is unthinkable in terms of Abrahamic monotheism. God keeps His word even if others break theirs. God does not, will not, abandon His people. The covenant with Abraham, given content at Mount Sinai, and renewed at every critical juncture in Israel's history since, is still in force, undiminished, unqualified, unbreakable.

The Old Testament is not old. God's covenant with the Jewish people is still alive, still strong. Acknowledgement of this fact has transformed the relationship between Christians and Jews and helped wipe away many centuries of tears. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* *© 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

"And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will cause evil beasts to cease from the land; neither shall the sword go through your land." (Leviticus 26:6) What kind of world will exist "at the end of the days," the period of the Messiah and human redemption? Will the basic structure of the universe, the rhythm of our lives remain exactly the same – the sixty minutes to the hour, two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen – with the only major difference being the miracle of a vast multitude of different drummers recognizing the One God and His chosen orchestral leader (Israel)?

If so, this means that our present realities can be sanctified, ennobled – but need not be utterly destroyed. Or will the messianic age have to inaugurate an entirely new world, an indelible change in the nature of the universe, radically different physics and physical existence?

I would like to suggest that such not-only-theoretical speculation can be discerned as the preoccupation of the great sages of the Mishna, and their two alternate theological views give rise to two different translations of a word in this Torah reading.

The opening of Bechukotai sounds remarkably redolent of the messianic dream, the goal of human history. God promises the Israelites that if they but maintain His laws and commandments, their physical needs will be taken care of with good crops and good harvests, and the ever-present danger of wild animals will be removed: "And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. I will cause evil beasts to cease (v'hishbati) from the land; neither shall the sword go through your land." (Leviticus 26:6)

How are we to understand the concept: "cause to cease"? The Midrash (Torat Kohanim) records that Rabbi Yehuda defines v'hishbati as God causing these "evil beasts" to disappear from the world, that God will destroy them. However, Rabbi Shimon interprets the word to mean that God will cause the evil of these beasts to cease: their evil nature will be destroyed, but the beasts themselves will not be destroyed.

Since this is not the only dispute recorded between these two sages, various commentaries have attempted to discern a more fundamental difference in their positions. For example, regarding the festival of Passover, our Bible commands: "Seven days [of Passover] shall you eat unleavened bread; but by the

first day you shall have caused the leaven to cease to exist (tashbitu) from your homes." (Exodus 12:15)

Clearly, the term for the "destruction" of leavening (chametz) is the same as the term for the "destruction" of wild beasts. And, true to form, we find the following difference of opinion in the Mishna: "Rabbi Yehuda rules there is no destruction except with fire, but the sages rule [including Rabbi Shimon] that [the leavened substance] may be turned into crumbs and scattered to the wind or thrown into the sea." (Pesachim 21a)

According to the Rogachover Rebbe, their debate is primarily semantic: in terms of how to define the verb sh-v-t, which may best be translated "to cease to exist." Rabbi Shimon (as well as the majority of the sages) defines "tashbitu" as the destruction of the primary function: as long as the leavening is no longer edible or the wild beasts are no longer vicious, they can be considered to have been destroyed. Rabbi Yehuda, on the other hand, insists that destruction, or ceasing to exist, must include the substantive demolition of the object itself.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson of blessed memory, reveals another ideological difference of opinion between these two sages. He suggests that they consistently differ as to what is more significant, the external action or the internal intention. For example, if an individual desecrates the Sabbath without having intended to do so – imagine he was washing his hands without realizing that the faucet he had turned on was directly above his business competitor's garden and he in fact was unintentionally causing the flowers to grow when he turned on the faucet – Rabbi Yehuda declares him culpable and Rabbi Shimon frees him from guilt. For the former it is the action that counts: a Jew ended up watering a garden on the Sabbath; for the latter it is the intention, and in our case in point he only intended to wash his hands.

They similarly disagree about garbage removal from the house to the public domain on the Sabbath: Rabbi Shimon frees the individual from biblical culpability, since he did not intend to use the garbage – the object of his act of carrying from domain to domain – and he therefore was not engaged in a meaningful creative activity; his only intent was to remove the garbage from his home, and not to derive benefit from it in any way. Rabbi Yehuda declares him guilty nevertheless, because after all he committed the act of carrying, and halakha is not concerned about the reason for which he carried.

The final example relates to the problem of oil left over in a lamp which had been lit before the start of a festival. Rabbi Yehuda forbids use of this oil because when it had initially been lit, the householder put it out of his mind for festival use, thereby rendering it muktzah, forbidden to be moved until the end of the festival day. Rabbi Shimon, however, permits it, because now that the light has gone out, the householder can use the oil in a manner permitted on the festival, and permissibility for him is only dependent on present intent. In this light, the initial differences of opinion between them assume a different perspective. For Rabbi Shimon, as long as I no longer intend to eat the leavening or as long as the animals have no intent to damage, these objects in effect ceased to exist; for Rabbi Yehuda the act of destruction is the only way for the objects to cease to exist.

Building on the Lubavitcher Rebbe, I would like to place a slightly different spin on the disputes we have just catalogued from a more theological point of view. How does Judaism deal with the problem of evil in the world? Is evil an objective force which must be destroyed, or can even evil be uplifted and redeemed, if only we perceive the positive essence of every aspect of creation and utilize it for good? Rabbi Shimon truly believes that the ultimate task of the individual is to sanctify everything; he in effect cancels the concept of muktzah (set aside, not for Sabbath or festival use) from the religio-legal lexicon, maintaining that virtually everything can be brought within the domain of the sacred if the human mind only wishes to use it for such a purpose. Rabbi Shimon is after all the great mystic of Jewish tradition, the teacher of the Zohar, the advocate of uniting all worlds and uplifting even the most far-flung sparks; "there is no object devoid of holiness," teaches Jewish mysticism.

On the other hand, Rabbi Yehuda is not so optimistic and does recognize the existence of evil. Hence, he emphasizes the biblical command "and you shall burn out the evil from their midst" (Deut. 17:7).

The period between Passover and Shavuot is the progressive count of days between the physical and incomplete redemption of the broken matza and our advancement after 49 days to the spiritual, all-embracing redemption of the Torah we received at Sinai. The ĥametz (leavening) is the symbol of that which swells and expands, of raw emotions and physical instincts; it is made to "cease to exist" by destruction on Passover.

On Shavuot, however, it will be sanctified, transformed into two holy loaves of challa (chametz) brought on the altar to God. What was forbidden (evil) seven weeks ago has now been redeemed. If anything, Shavuot is a manifestation of the redemption of evil, of our vision of the possibility of dedicating every aspect of our existence to God.

Rabbi Yehuda insisted on destroying the chametz on Passover, obliterating it from the world; Rabbi Shimon understood that it would only be necessary to re-route its function, to look at it in a different way.

Rabbi Yehuda insists that the evil beasts will be destroyed in the messianic period, a time when all that is evil will be obliterated from the earth; Rabbi Shimon maintains that the fundamental nature of the world will

not change, the wild animals will still roam the forests, but their evil will be transformed, their force and vigor will be utilized positively. Rabbi Yehuda sees the millennium as devoid of Amalek, the nation bent on the destruction of Israel; our Bible commands us to "destroy the memory of Amalek" (Deut. 25:19). Perhaps Rabbi Shimon would indeed see the millennium as being devoid of the memory of the ancient Amalek, for Amalek at that time will repent and join forces with Israel. Does our Talmud (Gittin 57b) not record that the grandchildren of Haman (the Aggagi Amalekite) taught Torah in Bnei Brak?! I pray for the vision of Rabbi Shimon. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. © 2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha, which concludes the book of Vayikra, deals with the realities of Jewish national and personal life. On one hand it describes in rapturous terms the blessings of happiness, security and serenity that can happen to the Jewish people and to the individual Jew. But on the other hand, it vividly and graphically describes death, exile, and tragedy.

Jewish history bears out the accuracy of both visions. We have lived through both experiences. Jewish history seems to have contained much longer periods of darkness than of light, of more tragedy than of joy and serenity. Though the Torah assigns observance of the commandments as the prime cause of security in Jewish life and non-observance of the same as the cause of tragedy, history and the great commentators to Torah seem to modify this cut and dried axiom.

God's wisdom and judgments are inscrutable and are beyond even elementary comprehension by us mortals. As such we are left wondering as to the tragedies that descended upon the Jewish people and that continue to plague us today. Though there are those amongst us that are prepared to give and accept glib answers to the causes of tragedy, the wise men of Israel warned us against such an approach. Observance of commandments is enormously difficult to fulfill completely and accurately.

As such it is difficult to measure the "why" part of this week's parsha. It is sufficient to note the "how it happened" part to realize that its message of contrasting periods of serenity and tragedy has been painstakingly accurate and contains not one word of hyperbole. The destruction of the Temples, the Crusades and pogroms, the Inquisition and the Holocaust are all graphically described in this week's parsha. Such is the prophetic power of the Torah.

In personal life, the longer one lives the more likely tragedy will somehow visit them. The Torah makes provision for this eventuality in its laws of mourning. We all hope for lives of goodness, and secure serenity. Yet almost inexorably, problems, disappointments and even tragedy intrude on our condition.

In Vayikra, the death of the sons of Aharon remains the prime example of tragedy suddenly destroying a sense of pride, satisfaction and seeming accomplishment. In this week's parsha the description of the punishment of Israel for its backsliding comes after a background of blessings and security. The past century presented the Jewish people with horrors of unimaginable intensity and of millennial accomplishments. The situation of extreme flux in our national life has continued throughout the years of the existence of the State of Israel.

The unexpected and sudden, but apparently regular change of circumstances in national Jewish life mirrors the same situation so recognizable to us from our personal lives. We are constantly blindsided by untoward and tragic events. So, the jarring contrast that the two main subjects of the parsha present to us are really a candid description of life and its omnipresent contradictions, and difficulties. Though we pray regularly for health and serenity, we must always be cognizant of how precarious situations truly are. Thus, as we rise to hear the conclusion of the book of Vayikra, we recite the mantra of "chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek" - let us be doubly strong and strengthen others! So may it be. *© 2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

How should the tochachah (reproof) be read? Two stories - I first heard from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin - about the Klausenberger Rebbe show the way. The Klausenberger Rebbe lost his entire family – his wife and eleven children – during the Holocaust. He was known to speak to God in loving but strong terms. After the war, he came to America before eventually settling in Israel.

Once, on a Sabbath morning in his New York shtiebel, when the portion of the tochachah was being read, the Torah reader read at a fast pace and in a low voice, as is the custom. Suddenly the Rebbe began to scream, "Pamelecher!" (Slower!) "Hecher!" (Louder!) His disciples were stunned. The tochachah was always read this way to declare that we want no part of the curse. But the Rebbe insisted, and so the tochachah was read slowly and aloud.

After the Sabbath, the students sought an explanation from the Rebbe, who said, "I lost my entire family in Europe. I know this curse well – not only as prediction, but also as that which has already happened. I, therefore, insist that it be read aloud as my way of telling God: 'Listen closely, Almighty God, the curse has

already come true. Now it is time for all of us to experience Your blessing of redemption!'"

Yet another story takes us in the opposite direction. It also occurred in America after the Shoah. The Rebbe was presiding over a circumcision. During the kriyat shem, the paragraph in which the name of the child is given, a sentence from Ezekiel is read: "And I passed over you, and I saw you wallowing in your bloods and I said, by your bloods you will live [b'damayich chayi]" (Ezekiel 16:6). As the Klausenberger came to these words, he paused. Tears flowed from his eyes. Absolute silence extended interminably. Finally, he called out softly, and yet loud enough for all to hear, "B'damayich chayi, b'damayich chayi."

Once again, his disciples surrounded him and asked for an explanation. "When I approached these words," the rabbi said, "I thought of my family and was overcome. In my heart I asked God, how could You have allowed the bloods of the innocent to be spilled? All at once, I realized that the word b'damayich may not come from dam [blood], but domem [silence], in the spirit of Aaron the high priest, who remained silent when informed that his sons had died serving in the Temple. Trembling, I was able to softly and quickly cry out those words."

Silence has holiness. It is sometimes called kedushat hadumiyah. It's in this spirit, too, that we read the tochachah. We are mandated to say every word, and so we cannot be fully silent – but we can come as close to silence as possible, reading it in a low but consequential voice and quickly without missing a single syllable.

Postscript: Given all he endured, the Klausenberger was the living example of thanking God for whatever gifts he received. An eyewitness shared with me that at his tisch on Friday nights, the Rebbe would recite Ribbon Ha'olamim after singing "Shalom Aleichem." In that tefillah is the phrase in which we express gratitude for all of God's kindness – al kol hachesed she'asita imadi. Notwithstanding the Klausenberger's great losses, he would repeat those words aloud in song over and over again. *© 2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Yom Yerushalayim

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Even though the entire Land of Israel was divided among the tribes, the city of Jerusalem is owned by all Jews and no one has a private stake in it. This applies to the land itself and not to the structures that are built on it. The buildings belong to whoever bought them.

The communal ownership of the land has certain interesting halachic ramifications. For example:

1. Since all who ascended to Jerusalem on the pilgrimage festivals (*regalim*) were partial owners of the land, they could not be charged rent for their stay in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it was in the interest of the locals to house the pilgrims, because they would benefit by receiving the skins of the sacrifices offered. Nowadays, though, no one can get out of paying for their stay in a hotel in Jerusalem. This is because in the meantime, non-Jews captured the land, and the Jews who later bought it are no longer obligated to subsidize the pilgrimages of the entire Jewish people.

2. Throughout the Land of Israel, one is not permitted to have a balcony that extends into the public domain. Rather, a person must limit his construction to his private property. However, in Jerusalem one is not permitted to build a balcony even on his own property, because the land belongs to everyone.

3. There is an additional special law pertaining to Jerusalem. Kilns are not allowed there (on account of the unsightly smoke). Actually, *halacha* does not allow a kiln within fifty cubits of any city in Israel. What is different about Jerusalem is that since no individual owns any part of it, no one would have been able to insist that his neighbor move his kiln outside the city limits if there weren't a special ordinance to that effect. *© 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"I will lay your cities in ruins and make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. (Vayikra 26:31) As the Jewish People decline and veer away from serving Hashem, the greater the chasm between them and Hashem will become. The parsha recounts the multiple "chances" Hashem will give us, and how we will know that's what He's doing. Here, we are told that Hashem will do more and more damage to us, in response to the damage we cause to the relationship.

In this posuk, Hashem informs us that our cities, including the holy places, will be laid waste, and He will not accept the aroma of our korbanos. It seems odd. Klal Yisrael is serving other gods; what korbanos are they offering? What pleasing aroma is there?

The meforshim offer different, yet similar, approaches to this. While there were some faithful kohanim, who undoubtedly offered sacrifices with proper intention, the fact that they were disconnected from the general Jewish population meant those offerings could bring no atonement which would benefit the Jews at large.

No longer were throngs of Jews ascending the Har Hashem to serve Him. The lonely men of faith were few and far between, no longer able to influence the nation. They performed the avoda, but it was disjointed. The kohanim were not buoyed by a population which needed them.

Even though Jews may have desired the sacrifices offered to Hashem, their hearts weren't in it. Hedging their bets by serving Hashem while also chasing idols and all sorts of physical evils was not something He would accept. The more the Jews felt they didn't need Hashem, the more distant He allowed Himself to become, until they would realize how empty their lives were.

Serving Hashem is not built on rituals or ceremonies, but on the relationship wherein we desire to be close to Him and wish to have Hashem in our lives constantly. Even if we offer pleasing aromas to Him, He will not be appeased unless they come with our devotion and dedication to Him.

When Noach failed to save his generation, he regretted it tremendously. He realized he had let Hashem down, too, and this pained him greatly. At that time, he offered korbanos, and Hashem chose to accept the pleasing aromas because Noach was trying to rebuild the relationship.

This is a lesson we all need to learn, hopefully before it comes to the troubles Hashem uses to remind us just how much He loves us, and how much He protects us when we return that love.

Once upon a time, a Kollel fellow had a fight with his wife. She was very upset by something he had said or done (or not said or not done) and she was barely speaking to him. Not knowing how to respond to this, he went to his Rosh Yeshiva who counseled him on how to restore peace in the home.

"Bring her some nice flowers. It will make her feel better." The young man dutifully went out and got a lovely bouquet. He brought them home to his delighted wife, who became markedly less delighted as he lovingly said: "Here. My Rosh Yeshiva said these would make you feel better." © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Warning of Exile

Parashat Bechukotai is the first of two major sections of the Torah that deal with the tochacha, a special warning given to the Jewish people concerning the curses leading to the punishment of exile from the land promised to them. This tochacha in our parasha involves the exile after the destruction of the First Temple. The tochacha in Parashat Ki Tavo is the warning about the exile after the destruction of the Second Temple, an exile which for many still exists until the time of Moshiach. Others say that the return to our land, which we can experience in our day, is the end of the exile and the beginning of the coming of Moshiach.

One section of the tochacha in our parasha discusses what will happen in response to our disregard of the shemittah year, when the land should have rested but, instead, was worked. Hashem states, "I will lay your cities in ruin, and I will make your sanctuaries desolate; I will not savor your satisfying aromas. I will make the land desolate; and your foes who dwell upon it will be desolate. And you, I will scatter among the nations, I will unsheathe the sword after you; your land will be desolate and your cities in ruin. Then the land will be appeased for its sabbatical (years) during all the years of its desolation, while you are in the land of your foes; then the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals. All the years of its desolation it will rest, whatever it did not rest during your sabbaticals when you dwelled upon her."

Rashi and HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explain that the seventy years of exile in Babylonia were caused by the seventy years of shemittah and yovel which were not observed in the Land of Israel. The Torah explains that the people treated shemittah and yovel casually, disregarding its significance, so Hashem said, "I will behave towards them (B'nei Yisrael) casually, also." Rashi explains that there was to be some comfort, however, in knowing that the conquerors of the land would not get any benefit from it. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that this helped the people to endure the exile. The Ohr HaChaim explains that this exile was done with the name Hashem, which corresponds to the characteristic of mercy; that mercy, being that our enemies would gain nothing from the land. Although this warning concerns the first exile, the same was true of the second exile until the Jews returned to the land in more recent times. As Hashem said, "I will make the land desolate; and your foes who dwell upon it will be desolate." The ibn Ezra explains that the desolation of the land was both to drive the Jews from the land and to make it uninhabitable for anyone who conquered it. The exile would not change the fact that the land was a gift from Hashem to the B'nei Yisrael, and it would be for their benefit only.

There was, however, a reckoning that had to take place, and this involved the "scattering" of the B'nei Yisrael in exile. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the word used for scattering, "ezareh, I will scatter," was a significant punishment to the people. The term used is related to the word for winnowing; just as winnowing scatters the chaff by throwing it into the wind, so the exile also was a random scattering of the people which did not permit them to remain together. When the B'nei Yisrael were taken to Egypt, they remained together and were able to strengthen each other because of their close contact. During this exile, the people each felt that they were abandoned and alone. Hirsch explains that without the land, the people could not flourish, and without the people, the land could not continue to produce its gift from Hashem.

The sentence, "Then the land will be appeased for its sabbatical (years) during all the years of its desolation, while you are in the land of your foes; then the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals," needs further explanation. The term used for "appease," "tirtzeh," has many different meanings. HaRav Hirsch

explains that the definition is not clear, “although the context is quite clear, and ratzah undoubtedly denotes atoning for sin and redressing the wrong that is in the hands of the sinner.” Another understanding of the word is the satisfaction of one’s own will in satisfying the will of another. Sometimes the other’s will is the Will of Hashem, yet at other times, the satisfaction comes from the “goodwill satisfaction of the wishes of another out of goodwill.”

We find that there is also an idea that the sin becomes a debt which must be repaid. HaRav Hirsch states, “Sin is not an act that is finished and final, but is a debt which demands settlement.” One might say that this “settlement” comes every Yom Kippur, but if that were so, there would never have been a need for exile. Each year the sins of the people would have been forgiven. One explanation is that Hashem does not forgive a sin if the sin continues. While people are often sorry for their sins and want to atone, the same temptation which caused the sin may often remain. When we discuss shemittah and Yovel, the fear of not having sustenance during the year and a half or two years that the land is dormant, is too strong for some people. In most sins, Hashem might still have been patient, but when it came to His Holy Land and His decrees concerning the year of rest for that Land, Hashem promised that He would require retribution.

We must return to our sentence, which also implies that a debt is owed to the land for the sin of working it during the sabbatical years. That would be a misunderstanding of the concept of shemittah. Though modern agriculture would explain that the land needs to lie fallow to replenish its nutrients and enable a better crop, this may not have been necessary of the Land of Israel at the time of the Temple due to Hashem’s blessing. Shemittah was not an agricultural decision by Hashem or He would have staggered the fields which would lie fallow. Instead, shemittah was a “spiritual” law designed to demonstrate Hashem’s ownership of the land and His ability to command that land to produce enough in the sixth year to provide for the lack of crops in the seventh and part of the eighth years. It is not the land which needed to be appeased, but Hashem for our lack of faith, even when we had already experienced the abundance of the sixth year.

More and more farmers in Israel each seventh year have chosen to observe shemittah in its most stringent forms. More and more Jews have placed their faith in Hashem above their concerns for their livelihood. Even if we are not farmers, may we join with them in our expressions of faith and willingness to follow Hashem’s command. *© 2024 Rabbi D. Levin*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

Last Thursday I got to shul a little bit early for Minchah and was learning when I overheard a conversation taking place a few rows behind me. Three men were speaking, one of whom was a Holocaust survivor I personally know.

It wasn't my conversation and I wanted to keep learning. I tried to shut it out, which was easier since they were speaking Hebrew. But when the younger of the three asked, "What God does want?" my attention involuntarily jumped from my world to theirs.

It was clear that they were talking about the October 7th atrocity, and what has occurred since. The older man, the survivor, calming emphasized that they cannot know for sure and, they could have emunah. This led to questions about the Holocaust, but as more people entered the room it became too hard to hear anymore, and Mincha began.

The truth is, we know what God wants. It's all through the Torah. Moshe Rabbeinu spells it out explicitly in Parashas Aikev, using those exact same words. The Gemora discusses what the Torah means in clear detail, and this week's parsha speaks about the repercussions of not delivering on that Divine expectation. Again, in explicit detail. So we know exactly what God wants from us.

And does anyone think that we're so close to being on target as a people that we still have to ask the question? Given what the Torah asks of us, and given how well we fulfill it, the more accurate question might be, "Why did it take so long in happening, and why hasn't it happened more often throughout history, God forbid?"

We don't like to ask such questions because we don't like their answers. The answer has rarely ever been because God is happy with our level of commitment. It's been more because God is merciful and gives man time to do things like teshuvah. We just tend to mistake His mercy and patience for His approval, which is why we ask the question when He takes action against us that proves otherwise.

We are told not to trust ourselves until the day we die, and that we should always do teshuvah (at least) one day before we die (which means every day since we don't know when our last day will be). The point is that we should never assume we're doing enough in God's eyes, even if we are. If we're praiseworthy, He's the One Who should do the praising, not us.

Because that is what we do when we pray with half a heart. The young man who asked the question, "What does God want?" let out three loud yawns during the quiet of Shemonah Esrai, making it sound as if he was not only tired but bored. It's not the way we act before someone we believe we need to keep impressed.

We praise ourselves when we do any mitzvah half-heartedly, or put our needs before those of others. We may not consciously say it, but we indicate that, from our perspective, we're good enough, do enough, or perhaps count more than others whom God holds in higher esteem.

This is what it means in the parsha, "and if you

despise My statutes and reject My ordinances" (Vayikra 26:15). If you think this warning doesn't apply to you, ask yourself, "What would I do differently if I truly loved performing mitzvos?" If the honest and informed answer is, "Nothing," then you're right, you are praiseworthy. But if the answer is, "This...and this...and this...etc." then you have basically admitted that, on some level, you despise God's mitzvos.

The Torah tells us that Ya'akov Avinu hated Leah, and we wonder how that could be true about someone like him. But Chazal explain that it only means that Ya'akov did not love Leah as much as Rachel, and yet the Torah still calls it hatred. Likewise, we might not feel as if we despise any of God's Torah, but if our love for it is not as great as it can be, should be, then from God's perspective, it is as we despise it.

The same is true of the spies who rejected Eretz Yisroel. Contrary to how it appears, they were not suicidal. They were just gravely mistaken about how God would view their decision to remain in the desert and not enter the Promised Land. They certainly did not intend to appear as if they were rejecting God. But that's how God viewed it, and we know what followed.

The question, "What does God want?" is a good one. But only if asked with a desire to improve, and not because we believe suffering was unwarranted. Chazak!

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RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

While there are various Midrashic comments on what "chukos" -- the embrace of which leads to the overflowing blessings described at the start of the parsha -- refers to, the simple meaning of the word is " decrees", i.e., laws that may not be consonant with, or may even defy, human reason.

The blessings describe a utopian world, and so there must be ultimate significance to their being dependent on our acceptance of such reason-defying laws.

And, indeed, the essence of dedication to the Divine lies in unquestioning obedience, in the recognition that Hashem's directives must override our personal, philosophical or practical concerns. That was what Avraham was ready to accept at the akeida, and what his descendants accepted when they followed Moshe into a barren and unforgiving desert.

That unquestioning trust of Divine will is called temimus, "pure simplicity" -- in the phrase's most sublime sense.

As Rava told a heretic who ridiculed his self-harming alacrity: "We Jews act with simple purity, as it says [in Mishlei 11:3], 'The simplicity [tumas] of the upright will guide them'." (Shabbos 88b)

The Shem MiShmuel notes that the "seven weeks" that are counted from Pesach to Shavuos are pointedly called sheva Shabbasos temimos -- "seven perfect weeks." He sees in the word temimos a hint to the mindset they are meant to cultivate: one of temimus, the bending of our intellects and hearts to Divine will. And that is, in fact, central to what we celebrate at the denouement of sefiras ha'omer, Shavuos.

Because, at Mattan Torah, which we celebrate on that holiday, our forebears' unanimous declaration was: "Naaseh v'nishma" -- "We will do and we will hear!" That is to say, we accept the Torah's laws even amid a lack of "hearing," of understanding.

Even the laws of the Torah that we feel we can understand, that seem entirely just and proper, are to be observed, in the end, because they are... laws of the Torah. So, even when we return a lost object or compensate someone for damage we have caused him, we do so, ultimately, not because it is "just" in our estimation but rather because Hashem has declared it so.

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RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Bechukotai begins by Hashem (G-d) proclaiming, "if you will walk in My decrees and observe My commandments..." (26:3), then 1) the rains will come in their season, 2) trees will bear fruit, 3) you will have bread, 4) there will be peace in the land, and 5) a sword will not pass through the land. Rashi (noted commentary) explains that "walking with My decrees" means that we should toil in understanding the decrees of the Torah. Although Rashi addresses the seemingly incorrect syntax of "walking" in laws, Rashi doesn't explain how walking/toiling in the Torah is accomplished, nor does it explain how the rewards correlate to the toiling or performance of the commandment (a common rule throughout the Torah).

A possible explanation could be a metaphoric reference to walking, telling us that it's not enough to sit back, read the Torah like a book, rather that we should pace and ponder every bit of the Torah, and never be satisfied with not knowing what, how, or why something is done. So why does the Torah list THESE specific rewards for making an effort to understand the Torah? Well, don't just read this thought, ponder the questions (possible answer may include the educational benefits of others seeing you care enough to look for answers)...

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