



שמע קולנו

THE PARABLE OF THE TREE: HASHEM'S PROMISE TO KLAL YISRAEL

Yonatan Chudnoff ('19)

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאֶף אֶת בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶף אֶת
בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֲזָכֹר וְהָאָרֶץ אֲזָכֹר:

"Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham I will remember; and I will remember the land (Vayikra 26:42)."

גִּפְן מִמִּצְרַיִם תִּסְיַע תִּגְרַשׁ גּוֹיִם וְתִטְעֶנָּה:

"You [Hashem] caused a grapevine to journey out of Egypt, You expelled nations and planted it." (Tehillim 80:9)

The second *parasha* of this week's *sedrah*, Bechukosai, begins on a seemingly happy note. The *parasha* begins by describing all the amazing things Hashem will do if Bnei Yisrael follow his laws, most notably among which is Shemittah, the prohibition against working the land on the seventh year of the Shemittah cycle. Hashem describes how He will cause great harvests, protection from other nations, success to Bnei Yisrael in battle, and that Hashem will be close to us spiritually. But this all takes a dramatic turn as the Tochacha begins. Hashem spends nearly thirty *pesukim* describing in detail all the terrible things that He will do if we do not listen to His commandments and rebel against Him. The *passuk* I would like to focus on is the one above. Hashem says that although He will do all of these terrible things because of all the sins that we have performed, He will still keep in mind the promise of the forefathers. And even though He may seem to despise us, He will not reject us completely, because He is our G-d.

The Midrash Rabbah comments on this *passuk* and compares it to the *passuk* in Tehillim above. The Midrash cites many explanations explaining the comparison of Bnei Yisrael to a grapevine, but the one that I would like to focus on is one of the last ones mentioned. It says that just as grapevines are trampled underfoot but eventually finds their way to the king's table, so too Bnei Yisrael are hated in this world, but in the World to Come they will feast at the royal table. The Yefeh To'ar says that people despise the Jews now either because they think the Jews are deserving to be looked down upon, or

because they just purely hate the Jews, but in the World to Come no one will continue holding these views. Instead of looking down upon Bnei Yisrael, they will consider Bnei Yisrael in very high regard and instead of hating them they will feel great love and admiration for them.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch illustrates this point with a beautiful parable. He compares Bnei Yisrael to a tree; just as trees sag under huge amounts of snow in the winter, Bnei Yisrael are sagging under sorrow, pain and grief in the darkness of Galus. Bnei Yisrael at first seemed invincible, but the stormy winds took all their fruit, their joy, away from them, and left them as naked, defenseless, poor branches. The tree's fruit was going to fall anyway, the leaves were already withered, and the branches were already old and dead, but the trunk of the tree, the core of the tree, is very much still alive and will survive these winds, just like the Jewish people will survive catastrophes that occur to them. Although it may seem that everything is dead and gone, life can still blossom. Even if the branches break again and again, they can still continue to grow. As long as the tree is connected to its roots stuck deep in the ground, as long as we, the Jewish people, are connected to our roots, we can live on and continue to grow and to bloom, and the branches, leaves, and fruit are able to grow.

This is a very powerful message that we can all learn from. Although our branches constantly fall off and terrible things sometimes happen to us, we must remember that they will grow back, that everything will work out, and that in the end Hashem will have mercy on his chosen nation. Even though now in the moment it may seem that life is falling apart and it very well may feel that way, remember that the branches will always grow back stronger and better and that every difficult situation will be overcome. With this understanding, may we finish enduring the long and difficult Galus, and merit to see our Redemption, *bevias go'eil tzedek bimeheira beyameinu amen*.

AMEILUS BATORAH AND YIR'AS SHAMAYIM

David Tanner ('18)

Based on a shmooze by Rabbi Baruch Pesach Mendelson

We are all aware that the Torah never includes unnecessary words. In Parashas Bechukosai, in the preface to the Tochachah, the Torah has many similar exhortations against not heeding Hashem's Will (Vayikra 26:14):

וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: וְאִם בְּחֻקְתֵי תִמְאָסוּ וְאִם אֶת מִשְׁפָּטֵי תִגְעַל נִפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת בְּרִיתִי:

“And if you do not listen to Me and do not perform all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes and reject My ordinances, not performing any of My commandments, thereby breaking My covenant [...then the following curses will occur].” Why are all of these different expressions (“...listen to Me” and “perform the commandments,” “despise My statutes” and “reject My ordinances”), which basically mean the same thing, necessary?

Chazal, quoted by Rashi, understand the various expressions as each having a different meaning, referring to the spiritual downward spiral that can occur to “one who does not listen to Hashem *lihiyos ameilim batorah*,” to toil in learning Torah. Such a person will stop performing the *mitzvos*, will be disgusted by those who do perform them, will hate Talmidei Chachamim, will try and prevent others from performing *mitzvos*, will deny that Hashem commanded the *mitzvos*, and ultimately will, *chas veshalom*, be “*kofer be'ikar*,” denying Hashem's existence. Each of these stages is caused by the previous and in turn causes the next. However, ask the Ba'alei Mussar, how is the last stage caused by the previous one? Why does denying that Hashem gave the *mitzvos* lead to denying Hashem entirely?

To answer this question, we must retell a story involving Rabbi Chatzkel Levenstein. Reb Chatzkel's wife received an electric mixer as a gift, something very new and unfamiliar at the time. She took it out of the box and tried to turn it on, to no success. She decided to wait until her husband came home and then ask him for help. When Reb Chatzkel came, he looked into the box and found a booklet of instructions, which explained how to use it. All of a sudden, it hit Reb Chatzkel like a ton of bricks. He took the box in his arms and ran to his *yeshiva*, where he gave a *klap* on the *bimah*. “Rabbosai! From this mixer we have a clear proof that Torah is *min hashamayim*. Just like this mixer has an instruction book, so too the world must come with an instruction book. The world's instruction book is the Torah.”

We now understand how a lack of faith in the divinity of the Torah leads to a lack of faith in G-d Himself—it is impossible to believe that Hashem created the world without

also believing that he made it with a set of instruction. But the broader question remains to be asked: can this terrible turn of events, starting with neglect of the *mitzvos* and ending in the ultimate heresy, really be caused by a lack of *ameilus* in Torah? Chazal didn't even say that this unfortunate “dropout” didn't learn Torah; rather, that he simply didn't *work hard* in his pursuit of Torah! How can this cause such drastic results?

The answer is that a lack of *ameilus* reveals a deeper problem: the lack of prominence Torah has in one's eyes. If we really understood the value of Torah, wouldn't we be straining with all of our power to understand and follow it? An investment banker diligently researches the latest stock trends, so as to best service his client. A lawyer on an importance case spends time reading relevant laws. The level of effort one spends in pursuit of an endeavor indicates the level of importance he gives to that endeavor. If one does not toil to understand Torah, one denies the importance of Torah, and by denying the existence of an instruction booklet, he in turn denies that there is a Creator.

Rav Yisrael Salanter noted that an important aspect of learning *be'iyun* is acquiring Yir'as Shamayim. Caring about every detail and every word of Torah, struggling to understand it and live it—this is what inspires a person to really fear Hashem. Through our learning, may we be *zocheh* to become true Yir'ei Shamayim and Ovdei Hashem.

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