

Revisionist History: Was there one exile or two?

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Both of our Holy Temples were destroyed on the ninth of Av. Is that only a reflection of the gravity of the day, or does it also indicate that the Second Temple was never independent of the First? Does our history reflect two Temples and two exiles, or are we still suffering from one long exile? Was the Second Temple period really a redemption?

On the surface¹ this would appear to be a dispute between the Ramban and the Abarbanel.

Exile is predicted and detailed twice in the Torah. Once in the 26th chapter of Vayikra and again in the 28th chapter of Devarim. The Ramban (Vayikra 26:16) understands this dichotomy to indicate two distinct historical periods; namely, the First and Second Temple periods respectively. The Abarbanel (Ibid. verse 27), however, sees too much overlap in both cause as well as substance to distinguish absolutely between Vayikra and Devarim in that regard. He therefore illustrates a single exile with a brief reprieve, whose purpose went unfulfilled. In his view, the return to the Land of Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple was intended to facilitate the necessary repentance,² but it was not a true redemption.³

¹ It seems that the dispute is rather technical. Even though the Ramban insists that Vayikra details only the first exile and Devarim only the second, he also writes that there was no repentance done for the sins causing the first exile, only confessions by the leadership. He also admits that there are certain verses that refer to both exiles even in Vayikra.

² Although cryptic, see the response of the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 7) to the question of observing fast days relating to the destruction of the First Temple and exile after the return to Zion and rebuilding of the Second Temple.

³ There is a subtlety in a passage of the Talmud that also reflects this. The Talmud (*Yoma* 54a) relates that when the Jewish People would arrive at the Temple during the *shalosh regalim* (three festivals), the curtain before the Holy of Holies was opened allowing them to view the cherubim atop the ark embracing (reflecting a love between Hashem and His people). The Talmud questions the allowance for this viewing based on a prohibition of the Levites to look at the Holy Ark when it was being covered prior to the transport of the Mishkan. The Talmud resolves this problem by distinguishing between the period prior and subsequent to the construction of the Temple. Before the construction of the Temple, the relationship between Hashem and His people was not yet comfortable enough to allow for such intimacy. After the Temple was built, it is as if husband and wife have their own home and she is now comfortable enough to allow for intimacy. The Talmud then questions this resolution based on an incident during the Second Temple period where a Kohen discovered the location where the Holy Ark had been hidden. So that no one would be able to view it, the Kohen died before he could indicate the precise location. This was after the Temple was built! To which the Talmud answers that this incident was during the Second Temple period and that was a period of divorce. The language of the Talmud is remarkable. Instead of referring to the Second Temple period as a period of reunion involving a degree of hesitation, or even suspicion, the Talmud refers to it as a period of divorce.

It follows, according to the Abarbanel, that we cannot view the causes and resolutions of the two periods as disparate. There was, in reality, only one exile, and the causes are found leading up to the first. This would force us to contextualize a famous passage in the Talmud regarding the cause of our current exile.

Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because of three things that were present: Idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed ... however, the Second Temple, when they were involved in Torah, mitzvos and acts of kindness, why was it destroyed? Due to baseless hatred that was present. This teaches you that baseless hatred is equal to three sins: idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed.

Yoma 9b

מקדש ראשון מפני מה חרב מפני שלשה דברים שהיו בו עבודה זרה וגלוי עריות ושפיכות דמים [...] אבל מקדש שני שהיו עוסקין בתורה ובמצות וגמילות חסדים מפני מה חרב מפני שהיתה בו שנאת חנם ללמדך ששקולה שנאת חנם כנגד שלש עבירות עבודה זרה גלוי עריות ושפיכות דמים
יומא ט:

According to the Abarbanel, the 70 years of exile after the destruction of the First Temple atoned for the violations of *shmittah* and *yovel*, but the People of Israel never properly repented for all of their other wrongdoing. The Land of Israel and even a Temple structure was provided after 70 years, but only to facilitate full repentance.⁴ This opportunity was squandered and the Temple structure lost due to baseless hatred. Apparently, as long as there was unity among the people, fixing the real problem was possible; the potential existed for a teshuvah movement en masse. However, once there was baseless hatred and the unity gone, the place of unity, the Second Temple, was lost as well. Baseless hatred destroyed the facilitator of teshuvah; but the teshuvah was not supposed to be for baseless hatred! The teshuvah was supposed to be for that which caused the first exile. According to the above passage in the Talmud, the cause would appear to be idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed. The Mishna (*Avos* 5:9) reflects this as well.⁵

However, Chazal point out additional sins that contributed, perhaps equally, to the destruction of the First Temple and subsequent exile⁶. Among them is an explicit statement from the prophet Yirmiyahu in the name of Hashem.

Rav Yehuda said, "Rav said, 'What does the verse mean (Yirmiyahu 9), 'Who is the man so wise that he can understand this? And who is he to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken, that he may declare it? Why is the land ruined?' Regarding this the sages said and did not explain it, the prophets said and did not explain it, until God Himself explained it, as it says (ibid.), 'God said because they abandoned My Torah that I gave before them.'" Rav Yehuda said, "Rav said, 'They did not make the blessing on the Torah first.'"

Bava Metzia 85a

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב מאי דכתיב (ירמיהו ט') מי האיש החכם ויבן את זאת ואשר דבר פי ה' אליו ויגדה על מה אבדה הארץ דבר זה אמרו חכמים ולא פירשוהו אמרו נביאים ולא פירשוהו עד שפירשו הקדוש ברוך הוא בעצמו שנאמר (ירמיהו ט') ויאמר ה' על עזבם את תורת אשר נתתי לפניהם אמר רב יהודה אמר רב שלא ברכו בתורה תחילה:
בבא מציעא פה.

⁴ The fact that the Divine Presence and Holy Ark, among several other important items, were lacking in the Second Temple (*Yoma* 21b) would seem to validate this approach.

⁵ "Exile comes to the world for idolatry, sexual immorality, bloodshed and failure to observe *shmittah* and *yovel*."

⁶ See *Bava Metzia* 30b, *Shabbos* 119b, and the section dealing with the destruction in *Gittin*. There are also statements made in midrashim and even in Rishonim.

How can we resolve this contradiction, why should a failure to recite the proper blessing lead to exile, and where is this even alluded to in the Torah?

Many have offered answers to one or more of these questions, and although he does not address any of them explicitly, I would like to point out some very telling comments of Rashi to Vayikra, specifically regarding the primary cause of the entire exile.

When we look to the Torah for the root of exile, we find the following:

If you do not listen to Me and do not perform all of these commandments: If you despise My laws and if your souls loathe My judgments so that you do not perform all of My commandments to violate my covenant:

Vayikra 26:14-15

וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל
הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: וְאִם בְּהִקְדְּמִי תִמְאָסוּ וְאִם אֶת
מִשְׁפָּטֵי תִגְעַל בְּנַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל
מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת בְּרִיתִי:
וַיִּקְרָא כו': יד-טו

The consequence of these failures is ultimately destruction of the Temple(s) and exile, as the chapter goes on to detail. What is not entirely clear at first glance, however, is the initial failure.

If you do not listen to Me. to be toiling in Torah, according to the midrash of the sages. Perhaps it refers to [not] fulfilling commandments? When it says, "and do not perform all of these commandments," [not] fulfilling commandments is stated, so how should I understand the phrase, "If you do not listen to Me"? To be toiling in Torah.

Rashi Vayikra 26:14

וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי. לְהִיּוֹת עֹמְלִים
בְּתוֹרָה, לְדַעַת מִדְרַשׁ חֲכָמִים. יִכּוֹל
לְקִיּוֹם הַמִּצְוֹת, כְּשֶׁהוּא אֹמֵר וְלֹא
תַעֲשׂוּ וְגו', הֲרֵי קִיּוֹם מִצְוֹת אִמּוֹר,
הֵא מָה אֲנִי מְקִיִּים וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ
לִי, לְהִיּוֹת עֹמְלִים בְּתוֹרָה.
רש"י וַיִּקְרָא כו': יד

Rashi struggled to understand each phrase precisely. One is tempted to translate "not listening to Me" as failing to perform commandments, or committing sins. If that were to be true however, then the very next phrase in the verse would be redundant. Therefore, "not listening" to Hashem must refer to something prior to violating His commandments, namely, not listening to the underlying value system of the Torah; not toiling in the Torah.

Two questions immediately trouble us. Why is the failure to toil in Torah couched in the phrase "not listening"? Furthermore, isn't learning Torah one of the commandments?

To properly understand this explanation of Rashi, and the foundation of the problem that led to exile and destruction, we have to see from where Rashi derived it. The Torah first details the positive before the negative. First the Torah tells us how to properly behave and thereby receive all the blessings before it expresses the opposite.

If you follow in my laws and guard my commandments and perform them:

Vayikra 26:3

אִם בְּהִקְדְּמִי תִלְכוּ וְאֶת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם:
וַיִּקְרָא פָּרָק כו': ג

Here, too, Rashi is bothered with the precision in the phrases of the Torah. What exactly does it mean to follow in the laws of Hashem? It cannot mean to perform them, because that is explicitly stated subsequently.

If you follow in my laws. Perhaps this refers to fulfilling commandments? When it says, “and guard My commandments” the fulfillment of commandments is stated. So how should I understand, “If you follow in my laws”? That you should be toiling in the Torah:

Rashi Vayikra 26:3

אם בחקתי תלכו. יכול זה קיום המצות, כשהוא אומר ואת מצותי תשמרו, הרי קיום המצות אמור, הא מה אני מקיים אם בחקתי תלכו, שתהיו עמלים בתורה:
רש"י ויקרא פרק כו פסוק ג

How did Rashi come to the conclusion that “following the laws” refers to toiling in Torah? It is understood that it cannot mean fulfilling commandments, but why does it necessarily refer to toiling in Torah as opposed to something else?

My Rebbi, Rav Aharon Kahn shlit”a, pointed out that this verse is clearly to be contrasted to one of striking linguistic similarity:

In their laws you should not follow

Vayikra 18:3

ובחקתיקם לא תלכו
ויקרא יח:ג

The verse is referring to the “laws” of the non-Jews, but what exactly is being prohibited?

It does not refer to legalistic “laws” of the non-Jew at all. Rather, customs and general behaviors observed by the non-Jewish world, without a clear, practically beneficial motivation, are prohibited.⁷ To mimic such practices is to follow an underlying non-Jewish approach, which is prohibited. Perhaps it is rooted in idolatry, but even if it is not, the absence of any practical benefit or clear motivation reveals a practice that is certainly not rooted in the Torah.⁸

Transposing this understanding of the word חוקים—“laws”—to the “laws of Hashem,” produces a remarkable explanation for our original verse. Following the laws of Hashem in this context refers to following the underlying attitudes and perspectives of the Torah, and does not refer to any specific commandment.

If these “laws” are not specific commandments, how does one even know what they are? Is there a guide to understanding underlying attitudes and perspectives? The answer, says Rashi, is through toiling in Torah. The way to discover and comprehend the underlying attitudes and perspectives of the Torah is through a strenuous immersion in the Torah itself. Thereby, ultimately, these “laws” will reveal themselves.

The foundation of the reception of blessing is the toiling in Torah in order to follow the underlying values, perspectives and sensitivities of the Torah. The foundation of destruction and exile is in the failure to do just that. When one is toiling in Torah, his mind and heart are inundated with everything good and appropriate, but when one fails to toil in Torah, the result is a vacuum that could potentially lead to disaster.

Rashi explains this further. The verses at the core of exile can be broken down into seven stages:

1. ואם לא תשמעו לי - Me
2. ולא תעשו את כל המצוות האלה: -

⁷ Ramo, Yoreh Deah 178.

⁸ See Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 4:12.

- 3. ואם בקחתי תמאסו-- If you despise My laws
- 4. ואם את משפטי תגעל נפשכם- and if your souls loathe My judgments
- 5. לבקתי עשות- so that you do not perform
- 6. את כל מצותי- all of My commandments
- 7. להפרכם את בריתי:- to violate my covenant-

There are seven steps leading to the subsequent curses. Rashi explains each step:

Behold seven sins. The first causes the second and so on until the seventh. And they are the following: He did not learn, and he did not do, he is disgusted by others that do, he hates the sages, he prevents others, he rejects commandments, he denies the Creator.

Rashi Vayikra 26:15

הרי שבע עבירות. הראשונה גוררת השנייה, וכן עד השביעית. ואלו הן: לא למד, ולא עשה, מואס באחרים העושים, שונא את החכמים, מונע את האחרים, כופר במצות, כופר בעיקר: רש"י ויקרא כו:טו

- 1. ואם לא תשמעו לי — One ceases serious learning of Torah
- 2. ולא תעשו את כל המצות האלה: — He ceases doing mitzvos properly and some in their entirety
- 3. ואם בקחתי תמאסו — He becomes disgusted by others that do the mitzvos
- 4. ואם את משפטי תגעל נפשכם — He resents and hates the Rabbis
- 5. לבקתי עשות — He tries to prevent others from doing mitzvos
- 6. את כל מצותי — He denies and rejects that certain practices could even be mitzvos
- 7. להפרכם את בריתי: — Ultimately he is compelled to deny the existence of the Creator Himself

According to Rashi, this is the slippery slope that ultimately leads to exile. The Torah is detailing the psychology of guilt and its consequential rationalizations. Failure to learn and properly perform mitzvos provokes a rationalization that can be disastrous. Repentance is, of course, possible at any given point, but one readily sees the challenge. A failure to be immersed in strenuous learning; the failure to toil in Torah, is the beginning of the slippery slope to destruction and exile.

Perhaps this is an appropriate way to understand the Talmud’s statement that exile resulted from the failure of Jewish People to “make the blessing on the Torah first.” The essential problem was in the relationship of the Jewish People to the Torah. They did not appreciate the Torah, and consequently they could not possible toil in it properly.⁹

According to the Abarbanel, there was only one exile, and the Jewish People are still suffering within it. Baseless hatred destroyed the most efficient facilitator of repentance, but the real cause of exile can be traced to a failure to toil in Torah. The two cannot be severed, there cannot be proper Torah along with baseless hatred, as we know all too well from the death of the students of Rabbi Akiva. In fact, the proper relationship and responsibility that each member of the Jewish People has to one another involves an attitude, perspective and sensitivity found in Torah, and in that sense, the problem of baseless hatred is itself a reflection of a failure to properly toil in Torah.

⁹ See Rashi to *Bava Metzia* 85b, and the famous explanation of the Ran to *Nedarim* 81a.