

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai – Returning Home

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This week's Parsha contains one of the two Tochechot, national admonishments describing the punishments that will be visited upon Bnei Yisrael if they do not follow God's laws, found in the Torah. The climatic end to the exile according to the Tochecha in Parshat Bechukotai will occur when finally Bnei Yisrael acknowledges their complicity in causing all the destruction they are experiencing and then "they will confess their sin and the sin of their forefathers,¹ for the treachery which they betrayed Me, and for behaving towards me with casualness and contrariness (קרי)." After such a dramatic mea culpa, one would have expected the Torah's tone to shift to a series of positive prose reflecting God's response to the contrition of Bnei Yisrael. Strangely enough, we find just the opposite. The Torah continues, "and I, too, will behave towards them with casualness and contrariness (קרי) and I will bring them into the land of their enemies" until they are humbled and remorseful which will then gain them absolution from their sins. After that negative interlude, the Torah finally turns over a positive leaf with, "I will remember My covenant with Yaakov... Yitzchak... and Avraham." Surprisingly, right after that affirmation of the covenantal relationship between God and Bnei Yisrael still being extant, the Torah once again continues as if it is still in the midst of the Tochecha. At this point, it seems to repeat the negative verses found earlier (ויקרא כו, לא-לה) that "the Land will be bereft of them and it will be appeased for the sabbaticals in its desolation from them." After those fits and stops, we finally reach the consolation one would have expected earlier upon Bnei Yisrael's declaration of penitence. God commits to never fully abandon Bnei Yisrael to the point of abrogating His covenant with them and He will always remain steadfastly the God of Israel.

ויקרא פרק כו

(לט) וְהַנְּשָׂאִים בְּכֶם יִמְקְלוּ בְּעֵינֵי בְּאֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם וְאִם בְּעֵינֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם יִמְקְלוּ:
 (מ) וְהִתְנַדְּוּ אֶת-עֵינֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בְּמַעַלְמֵי אֲשֶׁר מַעַלְוֵי בִי וְאִם אֲשֶׁר-הִלְכֵנוּ עִמִּי בְּקָרִי:
 (מא) אִף-אֲנִי אֵלֶּךָ עִמָּךְ בְּקָרִי וְהִבַּאתִי אֵלֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ אוֹ-אֵץ יִכְנַע לְבַבְךָ הָעֶרְלָ וְאֵץ יִרְצֹו אֶת-עֵינֵיכֶם:
 (מב) וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאִף אֶת-בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאִם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֶזְכָּר וְהָאָרֶץ אֶזְכָּר:
 (מג) וְהָאָרֶץ תַּעֲזֹב מֵחֶם וְתִרְצֹו אֶת-שַׁבְּתֹתֶיהָ בְּהַשְׁמִיחַ מֵחֶם וְהֵם יִרְצֹו אֶת-עֵינֵיכֶם יַעֲנֵו וְיִבְעֵו בְּמִשְׁפַּטִּי מֵאִסּוּ וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי גַּעֲלֵה נַפְשָׁם:
 (מד) וְאִם-גַּם-זֹאת בְּהַיּוֹתֵם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם לֹא-מֵאֲסֹתֶיךָ וְלֹא-גַעֲלֹתֶיךָ לְכַלְתֵּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם כִּי אֲנִי יִקְרָא אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
 (מה) וְזָכַרְתִּי לָהֶם בְּרִית רֵאשִׁינִי אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי-אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם לְהַיּוֹת לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים אֲנִי יִקְרָא:

Why does the Torah vacillate back and forth between positivity and negativity? The Chizkuni suggests the reason for the set back (מא, ויקרא כו) is that Bnei Yisrael's confession still lacks a sense of humility. Acknowledging culpability is a step in the right direction. It addresses the past, but it does not set a new course for the future. Submission and humility are the necessary ingredients to achieve true repentance and to be impactful in changing the future course of the nation. Rashi in a similar vein sees the word "or" (או) meaning "maybe"; with continued persecution, they possibly will return wholeheartedly to God and attain complete atonement. That sentiment is also echoed in the Ibn Ezra where he contends that this is the completion of the process of expunging the sins of Bnei Yisrael. While all these explanations elucidate the reason for the continued negative sentiment in the verses (מא ומג), they do not address why there are also positive verses (מב) interspersed in the continued bleak outlook. To solve this issue, the Or HaChayim suggests that the negative verse (מא) is actually a continuation of the people's confession; a justification of God's behavior towards Bnei Yisrael (צידוק הדין) and a recognition of the constructive nature of their punishment. Rashi also offers an alternative that explains the verse (מא) in a positive light. He suggests based on the Torat Kohanim² that God's promise to accompany Bnei Yisrael into the land of their enemies is a guarantee that the second half of the verse will come true. God will not allow them to assimilate and wither away in their exile amongst the nations, but He will intercede to compel them to repent and to deserve atonement and redemption. Both of these explanations are somewhat difficult textually, but they are also compromised by the continued negativity found in the latter verse (מג). To address all these issues, the Ibn Ezra suggests that both negative verses are actually describing events in the past that facilitated the contrition of Bnei Yisrael. God is summarizing how all the travails of the exile were intentionally rehabilitative to engender the positive outcome that was noted previously. This explanation seems compelling because it defines the confession as the turning point in the Tochecha, but it fails to address the fact that the negative verses (מא ומג) are presented in the future tense and not as a description of the past.

After quoting both Rashi and the Ibn Ezra to address the incongruity of the placement of this negative verse (מא) following the remorse expressed by Bnei Yisrael (מ), the Ramban suggests that the latter part of the Pasuk (מא) is addressing the different prospects as to how the exile will end. One possibility is that the people will be humbled and submissive and will repent or the other possibility is that the expunging of their sins will have been completed. Of course, it is unlikely that both of those objectives will be reached simultaneously. The end of the exile is not necessarily solely dependent on the repentance of the people nor is it entirely reliant on the completion of the punishment. In order to compensate for that differential in timing, God continues to punish the people even after they have seemingly turned the corner for the better. The Ramban brings historical examples to substantiate his position.

The Ramban in Sefer Breishit³ establishes a principle that he often repeats which is that the Torah's narrative with regards to our forefathers is a template for the future experiences of Bnei Yisrael. One must always contemplate how the stories of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov were predictive models of events that transpired to their offspring. It is

¹ זה המקור לנוסח הווידי שלנו שכוללים בו חטאות אבותינו

² תורת כהנים (ספרא) בחוקתי פרשה ב תחילת פרק ח אות ה

³ רמב"ן בראשית יב,ו

often summarized in the dictum, "the travails of the fathers are prescient for the children (מעשה אבות סימן לבנים)."⁴ The Ramban, in a similar fashion, extends this principle to prophetic statements in the Torah about future ordeals that Bnei Yisrael will confront. In that regard, the Ramban claims that the Tochecha found in Bechukotai is a description of the Babylonian exile and the destruction of the First Temple whereas the Tochecha contained in Ki Tavo is a reference to the Roman exile and the destruction of the Second Temple.⁵ Rabbi Avraham HaSefaradi suggests that just the opposite is true.⁶ The Tochecha of Sefer Devarim was directed towards the first exile while the Tochecha contained in Sefer Vayikra refers to the second exile. As somewhat of a middle position, the Torat HaMincha⁷ claims that the two Tochechot contain within them aspects of both exiles.

Combining those positions of the Ramban, one would expect the Tochecha in Behukotai to be predictive of the duration of the Babylonean exile as well as the nature of the redemption and the return to the Land of Israel from that expulsion. Sure enough, Rashi based on the Gemara Arachin⁸ demonstrates how the 70 years of the Babylonean exile were a quid pro quo for the failure of the people to keep 70 Sabbatical (שמיטין) and Jubilee (יובלות) years prior to the destruction of the Temple as is predicted in the Tochecha of Bechukotai. In addition, the Ramban shows how the return of the exiles to the Land of Israel was parallel to the verses at the end of the Tochecha. Even after they had "confessed their sins" and were permitted to return to the Land of Israel, God was still acting against them (אף אני אלך עמם בקרי) and did not grant them autonomy or security (והבאתי אתם בארץ אויביהם). They did not make a glorious return through conquest and dominion, but rather lived there under Persian rule. In addition, they were in a precarious position as they lacked financial and military security and were surrounded by persecutors and enemies.⁹ The Tochecha predicts this undignified return because while the people might have deserved the opportunity to return because of their repentance or because the allotted Babylonian reign had come to an end, Eretz Yisrael, spiritually, economically and politically was still not fully ready for their return.¹⁰

As predicted by Yirmiyahu HaNavi,¹¹ 70 years after the rise of the Babylonian empire, Cyrus grants permission for the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple.¹² While they successfully return to Eretz Yisrael, their efforts to resurrect the Temple are stymied by the local population that resents their repossessing of their ancestral heritage.¹³ Only 19 years later, as predicted by Daniel,¹⁴ 70 years after the destruction of the Temple,¹⁵ do the returning exiles successfully begin rebuilding the Temple¹⁶ and sanctify and secure Yerushalayim.¹⁷ The Ramban sees the failure of the returning exiles to build the Beit HaMikdash and reestablish Yerushalayim as a religious and political center as the fulfillment of the verse "and the Land will be bereft of them and it will be appeased for the sabbaticals in its desolation from them." Even after Bnei Yisrael's confession and return to Eretz Yisrael, that negative verse predicts that it will take time before all the pieces fall into place and there can be a more complete redemption.

In light of the Ramban's position, one could suggest that true repentance is a process rather than a precise pivotal moment in time.¹⁸ The Torah acknowledges that reality by wavering between moments of inspiration and success and setbacks and failures – positive and negative Pesukim. It describes the uncertainty of the trajectory despite the change in heart and the disappointments despite the progress. Even revolutionary change emerges through an evolutionary process.

This is so important for us to keep in mind today. Yom Yerushalayim almost always falls out after Parshat Bechukotai. At the founding of the State of Israel, there was great disappointment when it didn't include the ancient city of Yerushalayim and Har HaBayit. How could there be a State of Israel without its historic spiritual and political capital? After so many years of waiting, we were eager to see the complete redemption instantly. The return and consolation of the Tochecha remind us that this is a long process marked by trials and tribulations. God is telling us that it is possible that the redemptive process will even be missing integral pieces along the way, but this is already predicted in the Tochecha and has a paradigm in the Shivat Tzion of the second Temple. We are on God's clock. If we are uncertain and have our doubts about the slow pace of progress, amazingly, God reminds of this fact by giving us a state (1948) and then Yerushalayim (1967) 19 years later. It is no coincidence that this is exactly the same number of years that elapsed between the Shivat Tzion in Bayit Sheni and the beginning of the rebuilding of the Second Temple. With wishes for a Geulah Shleimah and Besorot Tovot.

Shabbat Shalom

⁴ מדרש תנחומא לך לך ט

⁵ רמב"ן ויקרא כו, טז

⁶ ר' אברהם בר רבי חייא הספרדי בהגיון הנפש לט: ובתורת המנחה פרשת כי תבא דרשה עג עמוד 657

⁷ רבי יעקב ב"ר חננאל סקלי מתלמידי הרשב"א

⁸ ערכין יב ורש"י ויקרא כו, לה וגם עיין [תרישימים לחישוב השמיטין](#)

⁹ נחמיה ד, ה וט ושם ט, לו-לז וגם דבר דומה בספורנו ויקרא כו, מא

¹⁰ עיין אור החיים כו, מג שיש כמה טעמים לגלות וגם נראה שיהיו צריכים לתקן את כל אחד מסבות הגלות להגשים את גאולתם השלימה

¹¹ ירמיהו א, כ"ט (ירמיהו כ"ט)

¹² עזרא א, א-ב

¹³ עיין עזרא ג, ח-ה ופרק ד

¹⁴ בשנת אחת למלכו אני דניאל בינתי בספרים מספר השנים אשר היה דבר יקוק אל ירמיה הנביא למלאות לחרבות ירושלים שבעים שנה (דניאל ט, ב)

¹⁵ עיין גמ' מגילה יב. וסדר עולם רבה פרק כט ורש"י עזרא א, א והרמב"ן ויקרא כו, מג

¹⁶ עזרא ד, כד ועזרא פרק ו זכריה א, ז-ז וחגי א, ב-ב

¹⁷ עיין נחמיה א, א ויב, כז עיין תוד"ה שנת עשרים ר"ה ג: שמסבירים שהם אותם 19 שנה וגם נראה מהרמב"ן ויקרא כו, מג אבל התוס' גם הביאו ע"ד הפשט שזה 19 שנה אחרי התחלת בנין המקדש בשנה השנית לדריוש

¹⁸ יש משהו דומה בפירוש האלשיך