

Geulas Yisrael #18 Ki Tavo- Two, Not Three

Moshe Taragin

We weren't just chosen by Hashem. In addition to selecting Avraham for grand mission, Hashem, forged a historical Covenant with him. This everlasting and unbreakable Covenant is invulnerable to human betrayal. The Covenant cannot be shattered but if, violated, harsh consequences await us. Twice, the Torah delineates the repercussions for disobeying our Covenant with Hashem. One "tochacha" section is inserted in the end of sefer Vaykira while the second one appears toward the end of sefer Devraim. Sadly, these nightmarish scenes materialized in the wake of our unremitting insubordination.

The book of Devarim is nicknamed "mishneh Torah" as it reviews and summarizes the earlier books. A review of the torah would be incomplete without a restatement of the terrifying details of the tochacha. However, there are significant discrepancies between the first tochacha of Vayikra and the review in Devarim. These signature differences convinced the Ramban that these accounts actually refer to two very different historical events. The earlier tochacha in Vayikra details the first exile while the latter segment in Devarim portrays the terrible disaster of the second exile.

One salient difference is the emphasis placed in the first tochacha, upon the sin of paganism. Tragically, pagan culture and idolatry ran rampant in the first Temple era, but was less widespread during the second Temple era. Evidently, the tochacha in Vayikra which attributes our exile to unbridled pagan worship must be depicting the first exile.

Conversely, the tochacha of Devarim chronicles a military invasion of a foreign and unfamiliar enemy, landing in Israel as “an eagle from afar”. As these conquering armies speak a confusing language, they are even more frightening. The first mikdash, however, was destroyed by a very familiar adversary. The Babylonians- our former allies- inhabited lands to the North of Israel and spoke an Aramaic which most Jews were conversant in. The Romans were a previously unknown army and struck a new form of terror in the hearts of the Jews. Suddenly, endless legions of Roman soldiers arrived on ships – as an eagle from a far-away land. Ironically, they carried the emblem of a bald eagle upon their weapons and their banners.

Additionally, the second tochacha describes the Jews being shipped out of Israel upon the high seas. The route from Yerushalayim to Babylonia doesn’t include any ocean journeys. Traveling to Rome, of course, entails being loaded as slaves and relocated over the Mediterranean sea. The details of the second tochacha are more consistent with the destruction of the second mikdash.

A final signal that Devarim refers to the second exile is the Torah’s description of our hideous and almost mindboggling suffering: we will become crazed from the sights we behold! The Babylonian exile lasted only 70 years and didn’t entail extraordinary or prolonged suffering. After the trauma of the initial destruction of the mikdash, the Jews landed in Babylonia and Persia and enjoyed relatively stable lives. In fact, life in Babylonia became too comfortable. Seventy years later Ezra invited the Jews to return and to rebuild Yerushalayim, but tragically, only 42,000 answered his call. The first exile wasn’t gruesome and didn’t match the grotesque imagery of the Devarim tochacha.

By contrast, the Jewish odyssey of the past 1900 years has been brutal and fierce. We have been ported from continent to continent and, sadly, have weathered persecution, hatred and discrimination. It is difficult to read the dreadful scenes of the Devarim tochacha without thinking about the nightmare of the Holocaust. The horrors of the second tochacha match the sad reality of our long exile.

This fascinating analysis of the Ramban discloses a crucial message about Jewish redemption. Each tochacha is tagged to a different Jewish exile. Essentially, the Torah only lists two exiles. Evidently, - if there is no third tochacha- there will be no third exile. That aspect of history has already concluded.

We have returned from the long exile described in Devarim. So many people are troubled by the question of whether our return to Israel is Divinely redemptive. How do we know it is a historical shift and not merely geopolitical dynamics or some other historical escapade? The Ramban's breakdown assures us that there will never be a third exile. Perhaps, our arrival in the land will be occasioned by struggle. Perhaps, the route to final redemption will be rocky and uneven. Perhaps, our greatest dreams may not fully be rapidly achieved. However, the masses of Jews who return home will not be exiled again. We are home to stay.