



THE REDEMPTIVE VALUE OF GALUT

One difference between *Churban Bayit Rishon* and *Churban Bayit Sheini* is the traditional Jewish sources we have that talk about them. Whereas *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* provide information about *Churban Bayit Rishon*, our principal Jewish source (aside from secular and archaeological sources) for most information on *Churban Bayit Sheini* is rabbinic literature. Although because of its greater proximity to our own time, *Churban Bayit Sheini* is historically better recorded and possibly easier for us to relate to, there is a fundamental difference in the nature of these sources: our information about the second *churban* derives from materials written by humans, but our knowledge about the first *churban* has the additional gravitas in the case of *Nevi'im* of

emanating from G-d and in the case of *Ketuvim* of emanating from divinely-inspired individuals.¹ Moreover, inasmuch as the *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* focused on *churban*, *galut*, and *geulah*, to understand what Hashem tells us should be the correct approach to these topics, we are well-advised to study the sources thoroughly.

If we study the prophecies of *churban*, particularly those of Yirmiyahu, Yechezkel, and Yeshayahu, an overarching theme is how devastating and disastrous the *galut* would be. The book of Eicha promotes a similar view of the *Churban*. Here are two examples from Yirmiyahu:

שָׂאוּ נֶס צִיּוֹנָה הָעִזּוּ אֶל תַּעֲמֹדוֹ כִּי רָעָה אֲנֹכִי
מִבֵּיָא מִצָּפוֹן וְשָׁבַר גְּדוֹל. עָלָה אֲרִיָּה מִסָּבִיב
וּמִשְׁחִית גּוֹיִם נָסַע יִצָּא מִמְּקוֹמוֹ לְשׁוּם אֲרָצָה
לְשָׂמָה עָרֵי תִצְיָנָה מֵאִין יוֹשֵׁב.

Set up a signpost: To Zion. Take refuge, do not delay! For I bring evil from the north, And great disaster. The lion has come up from his thicket: The destroyer of nations has set out, Has departed from his place, To make your land a desolation; Your cities shall be ruined, Without inhabitants.

Yirmiyahu 4:6-7

עַל כֵּן הִפָּס אֲרִיָּה מֵעֵר זָאב עֲרֵבוֹת יִשְׁדָּדִים
נָמַר שִׁקְדׁ עַל עָרֵיהֶם כָּל הַיּוֹצֵא מִהֵנָּה יִטְרַף כִּי
רַבּוּ פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם עָצְמוּ מִשְׁבוֹתֵיהֶם [מִשְׁבוֹתֵיהֶם].
Therefore, The lion of the forest strikes them down, The wolf of the desert ravages them. A leopard lies in wait by their towns; Whoever leaves them will be torn in pieces. For their transgressions are many, Their rebellious acts unnumbered.

Yirmiyahu 5:6

Alongside these and similar

prophecies and lamentations of doom and destruction, every *navi* who predicted and described the impending *galut* also included some *nevu'ot* of consolation, *nevu'ot hanechama*. In these, the *Nevi'im* foretell a better time, namely the *geulah*, when the *galut* will end. For example, Yirmiyahu 31:16 foretells:

וַיֵּשׁ תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתֶיךָ נְאֻם ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים
לְגְבוּלָם.

And there is hope for your future — declares the Lord: Your children shall return to their country.

Yechezkel 40-48 describes the building of the Third Temple and the division of the Land of Israel in the end of days. In most prophetic books written before and during the era of *Churban Bayit Rishon*, the theme of destruction, of gloom and doom, is much more pervasive than the theme of consolation. Nevertheless, the concept of consolation is spelled out clearly in the *pesukim* as a contrast to *galut*. The message is clear: when the terrible *galut* is over, *Klal Yisrael* will merit the *geulah* and thrive.

This essay will explore a different, less obvious form of consolation in these books of Tanach. Alongside the explicit references to *galut* as a negative experience, which will be ameliorated or reversed with the positive experience of *geulah*, the *Nevi'im* also articulated (albeit less prominently) the idea that *galut* in and of itself is beneficial for *Klal Yisrael*.

Galut Expiates Sin and Provides Kaparah

One way in which *galut* can be viewed as essentially a positive experience is in its ability to erase our sins. One sees this idea in the commentary on Yirmiyahu 5:1, where the *navi* says:

שׁוֹטְטוּ בְּחוּצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם וְרָאוּ נָא וְדַעוּ וּבְקִשׁוּ
בְּרַחוּבוֹתֶיהָ אִם תִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ אִם יֵשׁ עֲשֵׂה
מִשְׁפָּט מִבְּקֶשׁ אֲמוֹנָה וְאֶסְלַח לָהּ.

Roam the streets of Jerusalem, Search its squares, Look about and take note: You will not find a man, There is none who acts justly, Who seeks integrity— That I should pardon her.

Yirmiyahu claims that in Yerushalayim there is not even one completely good person, for if there were, Hashem would forgive the city. Radak questions this statement, contrasting it with Ps 79:2, which describes the *galut*, saying:

נִתְּנוּ אֶת נְבִלַת עֲבָדֶיךָ מֵאֲכָל לְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
בְּשָׂר חֲסִידֶיךָ לְחִיתוֹ אֶרֶץ.

They have left Your servants' corpses as food for the fowl of heaven, and the flesh of Your faithful for the wild beasts.

How can this verse identify the people who went into exile as *avadecha* (servants) and *chasidecha* (faithful), and yet Yirmiyahu claims there was not even one righteous person in Yerushalayim whose presence could have saved *Klal Yisrael*!? Radak answers this question with a principle considered in *Sanhedrin* 47a-b: When a person dies at the hands of a non-Jewish aggressor, as happened in the case of *Churban Bayit Rishon*, his/her sins are thereby expiated. Thus, *galut* cleansed those who died from sin, making *Klal Yisrael* as a group more righteous.

Galut Motivates Klal Yisrael to do Teshuvah

Yirmiyahu furthermore expresses the idea that *galut* and the travails surrounding it serve a purpose — they motivate people to return to Hashem. In 5:3 Yirmiyahu says, “*halo le'emunah hikitah otam*” — you struck them for integrity. R Yosef Qara explains that

this *pasuk* means that when Hashem sentences someone to suffering, He does it so the person will return to Him. A *tzaddik* who encounters Hashem's justice will take it to heart and return to Him. Thus, *galut* motivated *Klal Yisrael* to *teshuvah* in a way that they had not been motivated previously.

We see this idea as well in Yirmiyahu 15:11, where Hashem responds to Yirmiyahu's complaints about his suffering at the hands of those who want to silence him. Hashem responds:

אָמַר ה' אִם לֹא שְׂרוּתְךָ [שְׂרִיתֶיךָ] לְטוֹב אִם
לְזֵאֵ הַפְּגַעְתִּי בְּךָ בַּעַת רָעָה וּבַעַת צָרָה אֶת
הָאֲבִיב.

The Lord said: Surely, a remnant of you will I spare for a better fate! Surely, I will have you struck down in a time of distress and a time of disaster by the enemy.

Most *parshanim* explain this *pasuk* as referring to Yirmiyahu himself, meaning that in reward for his suffering, Hashem allowed him to survive the *galut* and be released by the enemy general (Nevuzaradan) himself. Shadal, however, has a unique interpretation: the *pasuk* refers not to Yirmiyahu personally, but to all *Klal Yisrael*.² What Hashem is telling them is they should not view *galut* in a negative light, because ultimately all the suffering is for their benefit, for it spurs them to do *teshuvah*. Hashem consoles Yirmiyahu — he should not see himself as a prophet of doom, but of renewal. The destruction he predicts will benefit *Klal Yisrael* in the long term, to motivate them to do *teshuvah*.

Galut Spurs Klal Yisrael to Strengthen their Connection with Hashem

Another benefit of *galut* is that it spurs us to rely on Hashem and daven to Him. In his commentary on Deut. 32:15 Rav Hirsch expresses this thought. That *pasuk* predicts that when life is good, Yeshurun (the Jewish people) will get “fat” and they will abandon Hashem, their Creator — “ויטש אלוך עשהו וינבל צור ישעתו”. Rav Hirsch sees this phrase as a predictor of their attitude to *galut*. When in *galut*, *Klal Yisrael* will rely on Hashem, in the absence of other supports, which will serve a positive purpose. However, in freedom, faith in Hashem became for them an antiquated belief (as the *pasuk* predicts), of little use in the era of abundance and success.

Galut Offers an Opportunity to Prove our Loyalty to Hashem

In several places, *nevi'im* speak about the reward Hashem will give *Klal Yisrael* for their suffering in *galut*. For example, Yeshayahu 62:11 foretells that at the time of Hashem’s redeeming *Klal Yisrael*, He will bring along His reward:

הִנֵּה ה' הוֹשִׁיעַ אֶל קִצְהָ הָאָרֶץ אִמְרוּ לְבַת צִיּוֹן
הִנֵּה יִשְׁעוּךָ בָּא הִנֵּה שֹׁכְרוּ אֶתוֹ וּפְעֻלָּתוֹ לְפָנָיו.
See, the Lord has proclaimed To the end of the earth: Announce to Fair Zion,
Your Deliverer is coming! See, his reward

is with Him, His recompense before Him. How is the reward related to *galut*? On that *pasuk* Radak says:

הפעולה הטובה שעשו בהחזיקם בתורתו
ובמצותיו עם הצרות הגדולות.
The reward is for their good deed in continuing to hold on to His Torah and mitzvot even with the difficult travails.

The hardships of the *galut* challenge us, but by making life difficult, they allow us to prove the depth of our commitment to Hashem and thereby earn more reward.

The Only Direction We Can Go Following Galut is Upward

In *perek* 24, Yirmiyahu demonstrates the benefits of *galut* with an important analogy and image:

הַדִּיד אֶחָד תְּאִנִּים טֹבוֹת מְאֹד כְּתֹאֲנֵי הַבְּכֻרוֹת
וְהַדִּיד אֶחָד תְּאִנִּים רְעוֹת מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר לֹא
תֵאָכְלָנָה מֵרַע.
One basket contained very good figs, like first-ripened figs, and the other basket contained very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.

Yirmiyahu 24:2

He portrays those who had already gone into the multi-stage *galut* as very good figs, while he portrays those who are yet to leave the Land of Israel for *galut* as bad figs that are not even

edible. This image appears counter-intuitive — shouldn’t the ones in *galut* be considered in worse shape than those who have not yet gone there? Abarbanel explains Yirmiyahu’s image with a fascinating insight: since those who went into *galut* are no longer waiting for it, they are looking forward to the good. Having already hit rock bottom, they look forward to better times. On the other hand, those “not yet exiled” look forward only to great travail. Hence, they are worse off than those who have already gone into exile.

Conclusion

As we enter the time of year when we focus on the *Churban*, let us focus on the benefits that *galut* has afforded us and utilize its remaining potentialities to improve our religious devotion. In this way, may we be worthy of the explicitly predicted better future in the form of *geulah*, speedily in our days.

Endnotes

1. On the difference between *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*, See R' David Qimhi, introduction to Psalms.
2. This explanation fits well with 15:12-14 as well.



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