

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Behuqqotai Part II Hope for the Future

### 1. Regarding the Destruction

If and when the devastation portrayed in the execration section of *Parashat Behuqqotai* would come to pass, an observer of the scene would surely assume he was viewing the destruction of Israel as a national entity. A reader of the Leviticus 26 account (through v. 38) would concur. The Israelites had continuously and exceedingly violated the covenant with Hashem and resisted turning back to Him even after a long series of prodigious punishments. In the orderly escalation of the severity of chastisements that He brought upon them, He is depicted as finally having come to loathe them. He destroyed Israel's cities, made the land desolate, scattered the remnant among the nations and had the enemy's sword pursue them even there (Lev. 26:31-33). A totally defeated, crushed, exiled and scattered nation does not return to its homeland, but assimilates in its dispersal. After a description of the enormous fear, confusion and distress of the remnant that survives in the land of its enemies, verse 37 states "And you shall not be able to stand upright before your enemies." Verse 38 adds a statement that appears to indicate that at that point the national end would have come: וְאַבְדֶתֶם בְּגוֹיִם ("And you shall perish among the nations"). The final clause of that verse adds "and the land of your enemies shall devour you."

The Sifra cites Rabbi Aqiba who taught that this "And you shall perish among the nations" verse refers to the ten tribes who were exiled to Media ([Babylonia] in the late eighth century B.C.E.) and did not return. Others, however, maintain that the verse refers to the whole nation and of course a part had already returned. Rabbi Aqiba was speaking many centuries after the event and at that point he applied the verse as he did.

In a talmudic passage of the aggadic genre that touches on an important theological matter, Rabbi Jose the son of Hanina expressed his thoughts on this verse along these very lines. He considers this "And you shall perish among the nations" verse to be one of four cases cited in Scripture in which "Moses decreed" and a later prophet "annulled," in this instance saving the nation from extinction (*b. Mak.* 24a). Moses said – transmitting the prophecy he received from G-d – וְאַבְדֶתֶם בְּגוֹיִם. Isaiah successfully counteracted this decree: "And on that day a great *shofar* will be blown and the lost (הַאֲבֵדִים) who are in the land of Assyria and the castoffs who are in the land of Egypt shall return" (Isa. 27:13). Isaiah defined the exiled as "lost" in those other lands rather than "perished" and G-d accepted his modification. (Isaiah lived at the time of the exile of the northern tribes.) This interpretation takes the biblical chastisement of Leviticus 26:38 as indicating that under the circumstances that occurred the end was envisioned to have actually come about. It was due to the extraordinary intervention of Isaiah (and of other prophets) that G-d reversed the decree that was situated at the culmination of the execrations.\*

In that same talmudic context and also referring to the וְאַבְדֶתֶם בְּגוֹיִם phrase, Rab stated, "I dread this verse." Rab Papa suggested: Perhaps the word that Rab takes as "perish" should be translated as "lost," as in the verse תְּעִיתִי כְּשֶׂה אֲבֵד בְּקֶשׁ עֲבָדֶךָ ("I have strayed like a lost sheep, seek Your servant" [Ps. 119:176]), meaning that the nation is merely lost, not destroyed. The response: Rab's dread is from the continuation of the verse, "and the land of your enemies shall devour you" (Lev. 26:38). Mar Zutra suggests that perhaps the word translated as "devoured" (וְאָכְלָה) should be translated as referring to partial spoilage as is the case with squash and gourds.

Several verses earlier in the Leviticus execration (vv. 34-35) it is stated that when the nation is exiled the land will receive its accumulated rest of the sabbatical year that it was denied when Israel was dwelling on it. At first sight, this appears to imply that the land remains the possession of Israel – no other people will be working it – and that somehow dispersal is not the end of national life. However, that declaration was an ironic metaphor, chiding Israel. Land does not require a lengthy rest; the statement expresses a sense of cosmic justice, not to be taken literally.

However, a glimmer of hope is provided Israel.

## 2. Hope

Verse 39 also speaks about the remaining remnant, referring to those who are the survivors of survivors in the land of their enemies. It asserts that they shall יִמְקוּ (they will *yimaqu* in their sins in the land of your enemies and also in the sins of their fathers that are with them, *yimaqu*). The standard meaning of *yimaqu* is to rot or waste away (Isa. 3:24; Zech. 14:12; Ps. 38:6; *Targume Onqelos* and *Jonathan* apparently translate “melt down”).

In Ezekiel 24:23, however, וַיִּמְקוּתֶם בְּעוֹנֵיכֶם is paired with וַיִּגְהָמְתֶם אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו (“and you shall moan one man to his brother”), indicating a likely connection to groaning and moaning. Therefore, in our context, *yimaqu* may very likely have the meaning of becoming despondent and remorseful because of their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers and the enormous suffering they have endured. It is not difficult to imagine how the latter meaning may have evolved from the idea of wasting away, but they are separate states of being. People who are wasting away moan and groan, and it is likely that they would be regretful of the actions that brought their predicament upon themselves. Our verse would then be a depiction of the onset of an early stage in the repentance process. The NJPS translates our verse: “They shall be heartsick over their iniquity,” a word that reflects inner movement and implies the beginning of contrition. The Israelites will eventually become totally dejected with their situation, giving up all hope for success or satisfaction in the way of life they had been living and sorrowful for past behavior.

It should be noted, however, that the sages seem to interpret *yimaqu* of our verse as “waste away.” In a talmudic discussion (*b. Ber. 7a*; *b. Sanh. 27b*) that qualifies the scope of G-d’s retributive trait of “visits the iniquities of fathers on sons” mentioned in the Decalogue, the word *itam* (“with them”) of our context, in וַיִּמְקוּ אִתָּם אֲבֹתָם, is cited. It is taken to imply that only when the sons continue in the sins of their fathers does cross-generational retribution apply. That is, the sons will suffer for their own sins and “for the sins of their fathers that are with them, *yimaqu*,” obviously translating *yimaqu* as suffering or “wasting away,” not as an expression initiating repentance.

In the following verse of our chapter (40), וְהִתְוַדוּ אֵת עֲוֹנָם וְאֵת עֲוֹן אֲבֹתָם בְּמַעַלְם אֲשֶׁר מָעְלוּ בִּי (and they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their trespass that they have trespassed against Me), the Israelites finally acknowledge their sinfulness in their having maintained a sacrilegious relationship with Hashem. In the second part of the verse Hashem continues to describe their past behavior for which they are remorseful, וַאֲשֶׁר הִלְכוּ עִמִּי בְּקֶרִי (“and also for that they had been relating to Me with *qeri*” (see our discussion on this word in our previous study). This statement is consistent with understanding *yimaqu* of the previous verse as indicating remorse.

The first part of verse 41 – אֲף אֲנִי אֶלֶף עִמָּם בְּקֶרִי (“I also would relate to them with *qeri*”) – is parenthetical and past-oriented, that is, it is Hashem’s comment on the last clause of verse 40 – אֲשֶׁר הִלְכוּ עִמִּי בְּקֶרִי (“that they had been relating to Me with *qeri*”). When the Israelites had related to Him with *qeri* He would respond in kind. This process had continued, leading to “and I brought them to the land of their enemies” (41b). It is also possible that the first two clauses of verse 41 are an expression of the insight the Israelites would come to; after depicting their remorse in verse 40, the text points to the new understanding they came to, that it was their transgressions that had inevitably brought divine response in kind.

Verse 41c continues with אוֹ אֲזַיִּכְנֶה לְבָבְךָ הָעֵרֶל וְאֲזַיִּרְצוּ אֶת עֲוֹנֶךָ (“then,” “until,” or “if then,” “their uncircumcised heart will be humbled and they will receive expiation for their iniquity”). If אוֹ אֲזַיִּ means

“then,” it describes the next step in the repentance process, that they humbled their obdurate hearts. If “until” (Ibn Ezra), it describes the duration of the chastisement mentioned in the preceding clause. If it has the effect of “if then” (Rashi), it is saying that if they humble their obdurate hearts and receive G-d’s acceptance, He will move to the next step, recalling the covenant (v. 42).

In any event, since at that point the remnant began the process of repentance and reconciliation, Hashem will recall the covenant He established with the patriarchs and recall the land, an intrinsic element in His promises to them (v. 42). Although there is no explicit mention here of the Israelites returning to the land, G-d’s recalling the covenant and the land hints at the possibility of it. Mention of the land prompts a parenthetical verse (43) that elaborates on the necessity of G-d having made the land desolate, a reference back to verses 34-35.

G-d’s recall of the covenant elicits the monumental statement that despite Israel’s disobedience, even when they are in exile, He will not scorn them to the extent of putting an end to them. He will not abrogate His covenant with them, for He, Hashem, is their G-d (v. 44). The people may endure an enormous amount of pain and suffering, many will be lost, but it will not be extinction of the nation.

Indeed, He will also recall the covenant He made with “the first ones,”\*\* those whom He brought forth from Egypt “in the sight of the nations” to be their G-d (v. 45). This invokes the notion that after the Exodus and G-d having attached His name to the Israelite people, putting an end to them would diminish His honor and reputation among the other nations. Verse 45 is the penultimate verse of the long covenant section, followed only by the grand closing verse. Accordingly, statements recalling the covenant and the Exodus in verse 45 are most fitting as they connect with the opening proclamation of the covenant, the first verse of the Decalogue, that cites the Exodus in its first verse.

### **3. An Innovative Concept**

The last few verses of the chapter read as if a tension exists within G-d as to how to relate to Israel. In order

that the Israelites might become the nation He desires, He entered into a covenant with them. So that they will comply with His will, He established consequences for noncompliance and warned them accordingly. He acts with integrity and truthfulness. But when carrying out their deserved retribution, He does not desire termination of the nation. Hence, once the spark of true contrition appears He is responsive to covenantal commitments. (A slightly different treatment of these issues is presented in Deuteronomy 32.)

Of course informing Israel of His everlasting commitment lessens the impact of the threats, although there remains a great measure of devastating retribution for a significant portion of the nation. This final verses at the conclusion of the curses veers sharply from the model of covenant format that was customary for human sovereigns. Their concerns were limited to compliance with their stipulations and prevention of violations. They generally renounced any interest in restoration of a relationship after a serious breach. They were concerned for the negative example it would set.

Thus, verses 39-45 contain a most remarkable articulation and interplay of two of the most innovative and consequential principles in the Torah. First, that sinners may restore a favorable relationship with G-d through remorse and contrition after violating His essential commandments time and again and after having received many warnings is a concept unheard of in world literature prior to the Torah. Indeed, it revolutionized all religion ever after. Previously, one who grievously sinned against his king or god could beg for forgiveness and could have others plead for him but acceptance of his plea was not up to him, no matter how hard he begged or committed himself to change his behavior.

Second, the covenant that G-d contracted with the Israelites, based on a relationship between a deity and man, was also a previously unattested matter. The corollaries of the covenant, the significance of G-d’s purpose, His promises to the patriarchs, His caring for the nation, the necessity of maintaining the sanctity of His word and fairness to all in meting out retribution for violation of His stipulations, raise extremely sensitive issues. Their combination with the concept

of repentance requires superhuman wisdom and extraordinary delicacy in application. Surely it is expected that the precise application of these factors would reflect the myriad varying circumstances that come into play and can be fathomed only by G-d.

It is significant that the word *berit* (covenant) appears eight times in Leviticus 26, reflecting the crucial detail that the thread of the covenant runs throughout.

The chapter's final verse (46) was discussed in our study on *Parashat Behar Part I*.

### **Endnotes**

\* For Rabbi S. D. Sassoon's comments on the theological underpinnings of this passage, see our study *Visiting the Iniquity of Fathers upon Sons*.

\*\* The Exodus generation is not normally thought of as "the first ones," a term that would seem to refer to the patriarchs. This is especially the case in our context since three verses prior the text had cited G-d's recalling the covenant with the three patriarchs, mentioned by name. Perhaps a point is made in this next-to-the-concluding verse by beginning with an allusion to the covenant with the patriarchs and immediately refocusing in mid-verse to bring in the Exodus. In other words, it was recalling the covenant with the patriarchs that launched the Exodus project (as expressed in Exod. 2:23-25).

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