

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

PARASHAT VEZOT HA-BERAKHA

It is with Hodaya la-Kadosh Barukh Hu that we dedicate this parsha shiur to Shani Berkowitz, born leil Shabbat to Kalman and Dikla. May her parents, and the entire Berkowitz-Boublil family, be zocheh to raise her le-Torah, le-chuppa u-le-maasim tovim!

Birth of a Nation:
The Framing Statements of Moshe's Blessing

By Rav Mordekhai Sabato

THE BLESSINGS OF YAAKOV AND MOSHE

At the center of our parasha stands Moshe's blessing of the nation before his death. In this blessing, Moshe addresses each of the tribes (with the exception of Shimon). In this sense, Moshe's blessing resembles the blessings that Yaakov bestowed upon his sons before his passing. The similarity between Moshe's blessings and those of Yaakov is easily discernible in several of their details, as well.

These two sets of blessings create a framework of blessings enveloping the beginning and the end of Am Yisrael's creation. Am Yisrael's creation began when the "seventy souls" of Yaakov's family descended to Egypt. Until then, we dealt with individual people, or at most a family. The descent of the seventy-member family to Egypt began the process of their transformation into a nation. Of course, the first one to sense this transformation was Pharaoh, who said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us" (Shemot 1:9). This marks the first time that Yisrael are referred to as a "people."

Yaakov's death, too, constitutes a landmark in the development process of Am Yisrael. Yaakov belongs to the generation of the patriarchs. So long as he lived with his children in Egypt, the period of the patriarchs had not ended and hence the children's generation had not begun its independent life. We may therefore view those seventeen years that Yaakov spent in Egypt as an overlap of sorts between the era of the patriarchs and the era of the children. It stands to reason that this period was necessary in order to prepare the nation for their lives in the Egyptian exile.

With Yaakov's death, the generation of the children begins living its independent life; Yaakov's blessings to the Tribes of Israel stand at the opening of this period.

Moshe administers his blessings on the eve of Benei Yisrael's entry into their land. Israel's entry into their land signifies the end of the process of Am Yisrael's creation. It thus turns out that Moshe's blessings were pronounced on the brink of the end of this process, the process of the nation's creation.

MOSHE'S INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION

Several differences exist with regard to the details of Yaakov's blessings and those of Moshe. These differences likely relate to the difference between the beginning of Am Yisrael's development and the conclusion of this process. We may assume that these differences reflect the changes that took place in the nation over the course of this period.

In this shiur, we will address one of the most blatant differences between the two sets of blessings: while Yaakov begins his blessing by addressing a specific tribe (Reuven), and similarly concludes by addressing a specific tribe (Yosef), Moshe introduces his comments to the tribes with some general remarks (verses 2-5) and likewise concludes the blessings with several general comments. The four introductory verses and the four concluding verses are unique in that they do not address any specific tribe, as opposed to all the other verses in between. Moshe's blessing to the tribes is thus placed within the framework of a general address to the nation. Let us now explore these eight verses.

Introduction:

- (1) This is the blessing with which Moshe, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before he died.
- (2) He said: The Lord came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran, and approached from Rivevot-Kodesh, lightning flashing at them from His right.
- (3) He indeed loved the people; their hallowed are all in Your hand. They followed in Your steps, accepting Your pronouncements.
- (4) Moshe charged us with the Teaching as the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov.
- (5) Then He became King in Yeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Israel together.

Conclusion:

- (26) O Yeshurun, there is none like God, riding through the heavens to protect you, through the skies in His majesty.
- (27) The ancient God is a refuge, a support are the arms everlasting. He drive out the enemy before you by His command: Destroy!
- (28) Thus Israel dwells in safety, untroubled is Yaakov's abode, in a land of grain and wine, under heavens dripping dew.

(29) O happy Israel! Who is like you, a people delivered by the Lord, your protecting shield, your sword majestic! Your enemies shall come cringing before you, and you shall tread on their backs.

These verses have been subject to many different interpretations, partially because some of the expressions contained within them are difficult to decipher. We will not deal with the difficult details of these passages, but rather will focus on their central points.

The parallel between the introduction and conclusion is discernible in several verses, both in the rare use of the term "Yeshurun" as a reference to Am Yisrael, and mainly in the contents of these passages.

In both the introduction and conclusion, Moshe emphasizes the relationship between God and Israel. Verse 3 of the introduction is devoted entirely to this theme, as it deals with the intimate relationship between God and His nation (according to the majority view among the commentators; the Rashbam explains differently). Verse 5 notes God's kingship over Israel. Three verses in the conclusion - 26, 27, and 29 - are devoted to this theme.

THEME OF THE INTRODUCTION

This comparison highlights the main difference between the two passages. In the introductory passage, the relationship between God and Israel is described as a mutual one: God's paternal concern and Israel's acceptance of God's kingship and commands. The opening verse of this passage (2) graphically describes God's revelation. This verse is commonly understood as a description of the Revelation at Sinai, due to the explicit mention of Sinai in this verse. The term "eshdat" (translated above as "lightning") is often interpreted as an allusion to the Torah, which was given during this Revelation.

This approach, however, gives rise to several difficulties. First, the verse mentions other mountains upon which God appeared, locations that seem to have little connection to the Revelation at Sinai. Secondly, it is hard to accept the definition of "eshdat" as Torah. As Shadal notes in his commentary, "dat" as an independent word (which we often translate as religion) is a Persian term never mentioned in the Tanakh until the period of the Persian Empire. It would seem, instead, that this verse refers to a general revelation of God in His world. At the end of the passage (verse 5), it turns out that God is King specifically over Yeshurun; thus, it was Israel who accepted God's kingship when the tribes assembled together with the nation's leaders (verse 5). Verse 5 thus corresponds to verse 2, and the two thereby establish the framework of the introductory passage.

At the center of the passage stand verses 3-4, which describe Israel's acceptance of God's commandments and His Torah. Verse 4 deviates from the literary framework of this passage in that it is essentially a citation of Israel's remarks. It would seem that the verse thereby seeks to emphasize Israel's absolute acceptance of the Torah, as evidenced by their declaration of its having been given to them.

In summary, in the introductory passage, God's kingship over His nation is founded upon their having accepted His commandments and His Torah.

THEME OF THE CONCLUSION

The concluding passage, by contrast, describes only God's relationship to His people; it makes no mention of the nation's relationship towards its God. In this passage, God's relationship to His nation revolves entirely around the settlement of the land. God's power and singularity are expressed in this passage solely in the description of God's assistance in expelling His nation's foes and having Israel reside in their place.

Let us dwell for a moment on the parallel between the verses that form the framework of the concluding passage:

(26) O Yeshurun, there is none LIKE GOD, riding through the heavens to PROTECT you ("be-ezrekha"), through the skies in His MAJESTY ("ga'avato").

(29) O happy Israel! Who is LIKE YOU, a people delivered by the Lord, your PROTECTING ("ezrekha") shield, your sword MAJESTIC ("ga'avatekha")! You enemies shall come cringing before you, and you shall tread on their backs.

Both verses begin by addressing Israel and praising them for their God's great capabilities. Formally, in verse 26 the praise is directed towards the Almighty - "There is none like God," whereas in verse 29 the praise is directed towards Israel - "Who is like you..." But this distinction is purely formal. The enthusiastic exclamation of "Who is like you" results from the fact that Israel is "a people delivered by the Lord." Thus, in this verse, too, essentially it is God who is praised. The second exclamation complements the first and explains that God's exclusivity is translated practically through Israel's salvation. The praise of God thus becomes equivalent to the praise of Israel.

The continuations of both these verses mention God's assistance and His majesty. In verse 29, God's majesty turns into the pride of Israel. This, too, comes to teach us that God's strength translates practically into the bolstering of the strength of Israel. The final clause of verse 29 - "Your enemies shall come cringing before you, and you shall tread on their backs" - which has no parallel in verse 26, comes to teach that the ultimate purpose of God's assistance and majesty is to subdue the enemies of Israel, to drive them away and have Israel inhabit the land in their stead.

In between these two "framework verses" we find the description of the settlement of the land. Verse 27 describes the enemies' banishment from the land and their destruction, and verse 28 describes Israel's settlement of their land. This description forms the heart of this passage, and we will discuss it further later in our study. This entire passage, including all four verses, thus deals with God's active involvement in Israel's settlement in its land.

In summary, then, although both the introductory and concluding passages describe God's relationship with His people, there is a fundamental difference between them. In the introductory passage, God's relationship with His nation revolves around Israel's acceptance of the Torah and God's commandments. In the concluding passage, God's relationship with Israel focuses on His active involvement in the banishment of the land's inhabitants and Am Yisrael's settlement in its land.

THE TORAH AND THE LAND

Moshe's blessings to Benei Yisrael are thus situated in between these two points of reference: the acceptance of the Torah and divine kingship on the one hand, and the settlement of the land on the other.

These elements, as stated, earn no mention in Yaakov's blessings. Yaakov addressed his sons at the beginning of the process of the nation's emergence. Though he indeed foresees the tribes' settlement in their land, the tribes are nevertheless the exclusive object of his blessing. His viewpoint does not yet include a clear picture of the specifics of the entire process. Moshe, who stands at the brink of the process's completion, and through whose efforts the entire process essentially unfolded, can include these matters in his prophecy. Moshe arranges the blessing to the tribes in between these two points of reference and thereby lends it its proper framework. Through their acceptance of Torah and the yoke of divine kingship, Benei Yisrael merited settling the land, and this is the source of the tribes' blessings.

RETURN TO EDEN

As mentioned, verses 27-28, which describe the expulsion of the enemy and Israel's residence in the land, constitute the main body of the concluding passage. Let us consider the words with which the Torah chooses to describe this process: "va-yegaresh" ("He drove out"); "va-yishkon" ("[Israel] dwells"). The combination of these two verbs appears in only one other location in the Torah - in Bereishit 3:24: "He drove the man out ['va-yegaresh et ha-adam'], and stationed ['va-yashken'] east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life." That this combination is mentioned in the Torah in only these two instances cannot be coincidental. The Torah apparently alludes to an association between the banishment of Adam from the garden of Eden (described at the beginning of the Torah) and Israel's settlement in their land (as mentioned in Moshe's blessings at the Torah's conclusion).

It would seem that Israel's entry into their land closes the circle that was opened with Adam's expulsion from the garden. Adam's banishment meant the annulment of God's plan to place in His garden the man that He created. At the time of creation, God had willed to place man, the crown jewel of creation, in the choicest of all places created on earth. The singularity of the garden extended beyond its containing "every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food," including the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. Its uniqueness lay mainly in the fact that it was there that "God moved about in the garden" (see Bereishit 3:8). If Adam had merited, he would have lived forever in the place where God "moves about." Adam's having been situated

in the place where God resides expresses man's ambition throughout the entire Tanakh - an ambition particularly underscored in Tehillim and mentioned there many times (e.g. 27:3, 36:8-10).

Adam's banishment from the garden meant the annulment of this plan. From this point on, it is not man who will reside in the garden of Eden, but rather "the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword" in order "to guard the way to the tree of life" from those who are not worthy of it. God's initial plan was to allow man to enjoy the Almighty's goodness in the place where He reveals His Shekhina and resides in its midst. In truth, however, this intention was never entirely rescinded. Rather, this goal will now assume a different form and follow a much longer and windier path.

At its conclusion, the Torah informs us that the realization of this primordial plan of creation is achieved now, through the banishment of the enemy and Israel's settlement in their land, "a land of grain and wine, under heavens dripping dew." Am Yisrael replaces Adam, and the land of Israel has replaced the garden of Eden. But the basic principle of placing the crown jewel of creation in the choicest place on earth is preserved.

With the division of mankind into seventy nations, the creation of Am Yisrael as God's people was already projected: "When the Most High gave nations their homes and set the divisions of man, He fixed the boundaries of peoples in relation to Israel's numbers. For the Lord's portion is His people, Yaakov His own allotment" (Devarim 32:8-9). Similarly, the revelation of the Shekhina, which in the past occurred in the garden of Eden, is now the exclusive quality of the Land of Israel - "It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye, from the year's beginning to the year's end" (Devarim 11:12). In the future, God will again "move about" there, as the verse explicitly predicts: "... the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit... I will establish My abode in your midst... I will be ever-present in your midst" (Vayikra 26:4-12).

Rashi's comments to this verse are particularly enlightening:

"I will be ever-present in your midst" - I will walk with you in the garden of Eden as one of you, and you will not tremble from My presence. Perhaps you will have no fear of Me? The verse therefore says: "and I will be for you a God'."

Rashi undoubtedly took the idea of God's walking about in the garden of Eden from the resemblance between this verse and that in Bereishit 3:8: "They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden." It stands to reason that the "garden of Eden" of which Rashi speaks actually refers to Eretz Yisrael, which fills the role of the garden of Eden insofar as it becomes the site of God's presence. Rashi's additional comment, "you will not tremble from My presence," also corresponds to a verse in the section of the garden of Eden. There Adam and Eve trembled from the movement of God in their midst, and they hid. The verse informs us that we will return to the situation before the sin, where God's presence among us in the garden of Eden will cause us not trepidation, but delight.

The comparison between Eretz Yisrael and the garden of Eden alluded to in the Torah's wording is explicated ever so clearly later, in the prophecy of Yechezkel:

And the desolate land, after lying waste in the sight of every passerby, shall again be tilled. And men shall say: That land, once desolate, has become like the garden of Eden. (36:34-35)

The Ramban, in the beginning of his commentary to the Torah, seems to allude to everything we have seen until now:

The Torah began with "In the beginning God created..." and the entire story of creation through the creation of man, and [told that] He granted man authority over His creatures and placed everything under his feet, and the garden of Eden, the choicest of all places created on earth, became the place for him to dwell in until his sin drove him from there. The people of the generation of the flood were likewise banished from the entire world due to their sin, and only the righteous one among them was spared together with his children. The sin of their offspring caused them to be dispersed in many places and spread throughout the lands, and they grabbed places for their families according to nationality as they came upon them.

It is therefore warranted that when a people continues to sin, it is driven from its land and another people comes to inhabit its land, for this has forever been God's rule in the world, all the more so with regard to what the Scripture tells that Canaan is cursed and destined for eternal slavery (Bereishit 9:27) and is not worthy of inheriting the choicest among inhabitable lands. Instead, the servants of God, the offspring of His beloved, with inherit it, as it is written (Tehillim 105:44), "He gave them the lands of nations; they inherited the wealth of peoples, that they might keep His laws and observe His teachings," meaning, He expelled from there those who rebelled against Him and had His servants settle there in order that they know that through His service they will inherit it. But if they sin against Him, the land will expel them, just as it expelled the nation that preceded them.

In this passage, the Ramban encompasses all the main points developed earlier. The Ramban referred to the garden of Eden as "the choicest of all places created on earth," and he employs the same phrase to describe the Land of Israel - "the choicest among inhabitable lands." The idea he develops draws a comparison between man's banishment from the garden of Eden and Israel's inheritance of the land. The Ramban thereby seeks to teach us that the inheritance of the land closes the circle that opens with man's expulsion from the garden of Eden. Towards the end of his comments, the Ramban took great pains to employ the expression, "He banished from there those who rebelled against Him and had His servants settle there," undoubtedly borrowing this combination (of "giresh" and "hishkin") from the verse we have discussed - and for good reason.

In his conclusion, the Ramban emphasizes that although Israel's residence in their land signifies the reversal of Adam's expulsion from the garden, nevertheless, even Am Yisrael's residence in the land depends on their service of the Almighty - precisely as Adam's residence in the garden of Eden was allowed on condition that he obeyed the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge. Indeed, Moshe himself translates the concepts of the tree of knowledge of good and evil ("tov va-ra") and the tree of life into a meaning relevant for Am Yisrael's dwelling in their land:

See, I set before you this day LIFE and GOODNESS, death and EVIL. For I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His laws, and His rules, that you may live and increase, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess... You shall choose life, in order that you live, you and your offspring. (Devarim 30:15-19)

(Translated by David Silverberg)