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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT KI TAVO

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Can there be a third destruction?

A reading of the curses in light of Ramban's commentary

By Rav Yoel Bin-Nun

a. Ramban's historical commentary

Ramban's commentary on the Torah features systematically historical exegesis. We shall examine a few citations that demonstrate this point and then focus more closely on the curses in our *parasha* and their implications for us. It should be noted that no other commentator – not Rashi; nor Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam; nor any other earlier or later commentator – is as consistent as Ramban in maintaining an historical interpretation of the Torah. However, the Vilna Gaon in several places<sup>1</sup> does indicate a similar view, as does R. Yehuda Alkalai.<sup>2</sup>

b. Examples of Ramban's historical exegesis

1. The secret of the age of the world

According to Ramban, six thousand years of history are alluded to in the six days of Creation, particular in the final word, "la'asot," "to make."

Know that there is more that is included in the word "la'asot," for the six days of Creation represent the entire history of the world... (*Bereishit* 2:3)

Ramban explains that the sixth day of Creation (on which God creates man) corresponds to the sixth millennium – the period in which he himself lived. As we know, Ramban arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* in the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of the sixth millennium counting from Creation. The Vilna Gaon, in comparison, calculates that the night of the sixth day (i.e., the night prior to the dawn of the sixth day – since the Torah documents each day as starting with the night: "And it was evening and it was morning, one day") covers a period of 500 years, and that the daytime in which man is created corresponds to his own era; hence his desire to move to *Eretz Yisrael* and his dispatching of most of his disciples to renew the Jewish settlement in the land.

2. "The deeds of the fathers are a sign for their descendants"

I shall tell you a general rule that is to be applied to all the episodes that follow, concerning Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. It is a great matter; our Sages allude to it briefly, stating (*Midrash Tanchuma* 9): "Everything that happened to the forefathers is a sign for their descendants." For this reason the text expounds at

length on their journeys and the digging of wells and other occurrences... They all come to teach about the future, for when one of these events happened to one of the three prophetic forefathers, he contemplated it and understood what was going to happen to his descendants. (*Bereishit* 12:6)

3. The exile in Egypt, sin and punishment

Avraham went down to Egypt because of the famine, to sojourn there in order to remain alive during the time of drought. And the Egyptians oppressed him with no justification, in order to take his wife, and the Holy One, blessed be He, wreaked vengeance upon them with great afflictions, and brought him out from there with cattle, silver and gold, and Pharaoh appointed men to send them on their way. This was a hint to [Avraham] that his children would go down to Egypt because of a famine, intending to sojourn there, and that the Egyptians would be evil towards them, and take their wives... and the Holy One, blessed be He, would avenge them with great afflictions, until [the Egyptians] would send them out with silver and gold and great herds of sheep and cattle, and press upon them to get them out of the land. Every last thing that happened to the patriarch happened also to his descendants...

And know that Avraham unwittingly committed a great transgression when he led his righteous wife into [the possibility of] stumbling into iniquity owing to his fear that he would be killed. He should have trusted God to save him and his wife and all that he had, for God has the power to help and deliver. Likewise, his departure from the land where he had originally been commanded to go, as a result of the famine, was a sin too, for God could have saved him even in the famine from death. And it was because of this deed that the exile in Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his descendants. The place of judgment was the place of wrong and transgression. (*Bereishit* 12:10)

4. Ya'akov sends messengers to Esav, to the land of Edom

To my mind, this hints that we were the cause of our own eventual downfall at the hand of Edom [Rome in the exegesis of *Chazal*], for the kings of the Second Temple period forged an alliance with the Romans (*Makkabim* I 8), and some of them went to Rome, and it was this that brought about the fall into their hands. This is mentioned in the teachings of our Sages and is documented in the literature (*Yosifon* 65). (*Bereishit* 32:4)

5. Ya'akov's blessing to Yehuda and the bequeathing of the monarchy: "The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the scepter from between his legs."

To my mind, the kings from other tribes who ruled over Israel after David, went against the will of their forefather [Ya'akov] and transferred the inheritance. In so doing they were relying on the words of the prophet Achiya of Shilo, who anointed Yeravam...

And when Israel persisted in crowning one king after the next over them from the other tribes, instead of going back to the monarchy of Yehuda, they were

<sup>1</sup> See the extensive review in A. Morgenstern's book, *Meshichiyut Veyishuv Eretz Yisrael Be-machatzit Ha-rishona shel Ha-me'a Ha-19* (Jerusalem, 5745), pp. 94-111.

<sup>2</sup> See the thorough discussion in my book, *Nes Kibbutz Galuyot* (Jerusalem edition [5768-9], pp. 76-90; Tel Aviv edition [5771], pp. 134-51).

transgressing the will of their patriarch and they were punished for this, as [the prophet] Hoshea says (8:4), “They have made kings, but not of Mine.” And this was [the reason for] the punishment meted out to the Chashmona’im, who ruled during the Second Temple period, for they were [otherwise] supremely pious, and had it not been for them the Torah and commandments would have been forgotten in Israel.

Nevertheless, they were severely punished, and all four pious sons of the elder Chashmona’i, who ruled consecutively – despite their valor and their success – fell by the sword to their enemies... because they ruled even though they were not from the seed of Yehuda and from the house of David, and they uprooted the staff and the scepter altogether. They were punished measure for measure, for the Holy One, blessed be He, caused their slaves to rule over them, and [these slaves] cut them off.

It may also be that their reign was improper because they were priests... and they should not have ruled, but rather only performed the Divine service. I have seen in Talmud Yerushalmi *Horayot* (3:2): “We do not anoint priests as kings. R. Yehuda of Ein-Tor said: [The reason for this is] because [of Ya’akov’s words,] ‘The staff shall not depart from Yehuda.’ R. Chiya bar Abba said: [Because of the biblical promise,] ‘In order that he may lengthen his days in his kingship – he and his children – in the midst of Israel’ (*Devarim* 17:20). For what is written thereafter? ‘The Levitical priests... shall have no part or inheritance with Israel’ (18:1).”

*Chazal* deduce here that we do not anoint kings from among the priests, the sons of Aharon. The former view [that of R. Yehuda of Ein-Tor] explains [the barring of priests from the monarchy] as showing honor to Yehuda – that power will not shift from that tribe – and therefore even if Jews appoint kings over them from among the other tribes, as a necessary temporary measure, they are not anointed, so that the majesty of monarchy does not rest upon them, but rather they are akin to “judges and officers”... But R. Chiya bar Abba expounds that such a situation is barred by the Torah because the Levitical priests ... shall have no part or inheritance in the kingdom. And this is appropriate and fitting. (*Bereishit* 49:10)

6. The lighting of the lamps following the inauguration of the altar by the twelve princes of the tribes

The point of this Midrashic exegesis is to find an allusion in the *parasha* to the lighting of the lamps that was performed during the Second Temple period by Aharon and his sons – by this I refer to the Chashmona’i High Priest and his sons... For everyone knows that when there is no Temple, and the sacrifices have ceased because of the destruction, there is also no [lighting of] lamps. However, the verses here hint to the lamps of the rededication [of the Temple] by the Chashmona’im, which continues even after the destruction, throughout our exile. (*Bamidbar* 8:2)

c. **The two sets of curses and the two destructions<sup>3</sup>**

Twice the Torah lists curses – horrific punishments for violating

<sup>3</sup> Owing to the tremendous importance of Ramban’s interpretation, I cite his commentary here almost in full, mostly from *Vayikra*, with some additions from his commentary on *Devarim*.

the covenant with God. They appear in chapter 26 of *Sefer Vayikra* and chapter 28 of *Sefer Devarim*. In his commentary on the former (v. 16), Ramban writes:

Know and understand that these curses hint to the first exile, for it is to the First Temple that all the words of this covenant, concerning the exile and the redemption from it, correspond. For we see in the rebuke here that it is written, “And if you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My judgments” (26:15) and it also says, “such that you violate My covenant,” with mention later made of *bamot*, sun-images, and idols (v. 30), as [during the First Temple period] they worshipped the stars and performed all manner of evil. And it is in this regard that God says (v. 31), “I shall make your sanctuaries desolate, and I shall not smell your sweet savors” – thereby warning them that He would remove them from His sanctuary and the acceptance of the sacrifices that He had favoured in that sanctuary. The punishments that would befall them [according to these curses] include the sword, wild beasts, pestilence, famine and – finally – exile. Indeed, all these things came about [at the destruction of the First Temple], as recorded explicitly in the Book of *Yirmeyahu* (32:24).

And it is concerning that [first] exile that God says (*Vayikra* 26:34-35), “Then the land shall be paid her sabbaths.... As long as it lies desolate, it shall have rest, for it did not rest in your sabbaths when you dwelt upon it.” For the number of years of the exile correspond to the years in which they failed to observe *shemitta*. Likewise, the text states, in relation to that exile (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 36:21), “To fulfil the word of God as spoken by Yirmeyahu, until the land had been paid her sabbaths; for as long as she lay desolate, she rested, to make up seventy years.” Thus He warned them and thus it befell them. Hence, it is clear that the text here [in *Vayikra*] is speaking of that [first] exile [to Babylonia].

If we also turn our attention to the redemption from [that exile, we see] that God promises only that He will remember the covenant of the forefathers and the remembrance of the land, but there is no mention of Him forgiving their sin and their transgression and loving them as before, nor any mention of gathering in those of them who had been dispersed. For what indeed happened, when they came back from Babylonia, was that only [the tribes of] Yehuda and Binyamin returned, along with a few Levites, and some from the other tribes who had been exiled to Babylonia, and they returned in poverty and in servitude to the kings of Persia...

The covenant in *Devarim*, in contrast, hints to our present exile and the redemption from it. For we see, first of all, that there is no hint to either its end or its duration, nor is there a promise concerning the redemption; rather, it is dependent on repentance... Nor is there any mention [in *Devarim*] of those sins – that they would make *asherim* and sun-images, or any idolatrous worship... For so it was during the Second Temple period, as our Sages teach (*Yoma* 9a): “Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed. But the Second Temple – when, as we know, they were engaged in Torah and in acts of kindness – why was it destroyed? Because of the causeless hatred that existed among them...”

The curses there [in *Devarim*] continue: “God will bring a

nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, which will swoop down like an eagle" (28:49) – hinting to the invasion of the Romans,<sup>4</sup> who came from very far away; indeed, the text states, "a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known" (v. 36), and "a nation whose tongue you shall not understand" (v. 49), indicating the degree of their foreignness in our land. Not so in the words of this covenant [in *Vayikra*], where the text alludes to their exile to Babylonia and Assyria, which are close to the Land and which were constantly at war with them; the stock of Israel were from there and they were familiar with their language, as it is written (*Melakhim* II 18:26), "Speak, I pray you, to your servants in Aramean, for we understand it." Similarly, the verse stating, "God shall scatter you among all the peoples, from one end of the earth to the other" (v. 64) appears in relation to our exile today, in which we are indeed dispersed throughout the world, and it also says (v. 68), "And God shall return you to Egypt in ships" – for in this exile Titus indeed filled ships with them [Jewish captives from the Land of Israel], as documented in the Roman chronicles.<sup>5</sup>

It also says, "Your sons and daughters shall be given unto another people, and your eyes shall see" (v. 32); "You shall beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity" (v. 41) – this does not describe an exile of parents along with children, but rather a captivity of the children alone, while the parents remained in the land. This description does not appear in the first covenant [i.e., the curses in *Vayikra*], for that exile was a complete one, but it appears in the second covenant [*Devarim*], for the Romans then ruled in our land and took the sons and daughters at their will. Likewise [the warning], "You shall serve your enemy, whom God shall send against you, in hunger and in thirst" (v. 48) alludes to our servitude under the Romans in our own land, where their officers ruled over us, imposing a heavy yoke and taking both our selves and our property, as is well-documented in history.

Further proof [that the curses in *Devarim* refer to the Roman exile] is that the text states, "God shall bring you, and your king whom you shall set over you, to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known." For King Agrippa went to Rome at the end of the Second Temple period, and it was on account of his going there that the Temple was destroyed. Notably, the text does not say: the king who shall rule over you, but rather, "your king whom you shall set over you" – by which God alludes to the fact that [Agrippa] was not fit to be king, for it was forbidden according to the law of the Torah for him to rule over Israel, but they nevertheless appointed him and his forefathers over them, in contravention of the law, as stated in *Sota* (41a). All of these hints clearly indicate [that the curses in *Devarim* relate to] our present exile.

Similarly, Ramban comments on the curses in *Devarim* (28:42):

This may also be an allusion to a king who preceded Agrippa – namely, Aristobulus, who was captured by the Roman general and brought [to Rome] in chains, becoming "a proverb and a byword among all the

peoples" (v. 37) who were amazed: despite [Israel's] renowned might, "How the mighty have fallen, and [their] weapons of war perished!" (*II Shemuel* 1:27). Afterwards, Agrippa came back to the Land, with the emissary of the king of Rome, and captured major cities in the land of Yehuda. This was in fulfillment of the verse (v. 48), "You shall serve the enemies whom God shall send against you, in hunger and in thirst," and the verse (v. 49), "God will bring a nation against you from afar" – for Vespasian, and his son Titus, came with a great Roman army into the Land, capturing all the fortified cities of Yehuda, and oppressing them greatly, as is known from the history books: they captured the walls of Jerusalem, leaving only the Sanctuary and the wall of the courtyard, and [the besieged Jews] were [starved to the point where they were] forced to eat the flesh of their sons and daughters. And when the Sanctuary itself was captured, it was in fulfillment of the verse, "And you shall be plucked from off the land" (v. 63). Then the Romans returned to their own country, taking with them the captivity of Jerusalem, as did many other people who had joined [the Romans in the destruction of Jerusalem] – from Greece, Egypt, Aram, and many other nations. Thus God fulfilled the verse, "God shall scatter you among all the peoples" (v. 64) along with the verses that follow, describing their punishment in exile. Likewise, the verse, "And your life shall hang in doubt before you" (v. 66) alludes to our fear in exile under the various nations who are constantly issuing decrees against us.

The proper interpretation is that these verses [also] allude to those generations at the time of the Second Temple, for [the Romans] schemed against them to annihilate them completely; the text therefore goes on to say (v. 68), "God shall return you to Egypt in ships" – for this is what happened when [the Romans] finished removing them from the Land."

Let us return to his commentary on *Vayikra*:

Now, the redemption alluded to in this second covenant is a complete redemption, superior to all the others. The text reads, "And it shall come to pass, when all these things have befallen you – the blessing and the curse," and God promises, "And He shall be good to you, and multiply you more than your forefathers" – which is a promise to all the tribes of Israel, not [just] to one sixth of the nation. And there [in *Devarim* 30:7] God promises that He will cut down and destroy those who exiled us...

However, the verse that appears here (*Vayikra* 26:32), "And your enemies who shall dwell therein shall be desolate in it," is a positive message: it foretells that throughout the exiles, our Land will not welcome our enemies. This, too, is a great proof and promise to us, for throughout the inhabited world you will not find such a "good and expansive land" (*Shemot* 3:8) which was always inhabited, yet currently lies so desolate. For since we left it, it has accepted no other nation or people; all have tried to settle it, but to no avail.

And behold, the first covenant mentioned here [in *Vayikra*] was forged by the Holy One, blessed be He, for His great Name was indeed with us in the First Temple. But the second covenant, in *Parashat Ve-haya Ki Tavo*, uttered by Moshe, alludes to the complete disappearance of the Divine Presence, for in the Second Temple there remained only the Glory of His

<sup>4</sup> Notably, the eagle was the symbol of Imperial Rome.

<sup>5</sup> To this day, it is not clear to me which history books Ramban read, in what language and how he came upon them.

Name.

Thus, in his commentary on the two parallel sets of curses, reproof and rebuke, Ramban presents his unique exegetical approach, according to which the rebuke in *Vayikra* is a prophecy concerning the destruction of the First Temple, while the rebuke in *Devarim* foretells the destruction of the Second Temple. This interpretation sits well with Ramban's general tendency to view the Torah through a historical lens.

**d. There will be no third destruction.**

We have no way of deciding the weighty controversy among the commentators as to whether the Torah should be understood through the lens of history. However, we certainly should try our best to understand Ramban's exegesis as it stands, as well as the conclusions arising from it.

The most important implication of Ramban's interpretation is that there can be no third destruction, since the Torah offers no third set of curses. After the ingathering of the exiles described in *Parashat Nitzavim*, there may be terrible suffering – as foretold in the song of *Haazinu* – but there is no room for a third destruction.

Once again, it must be emphasized that other major classical commentators, Rashi and Rambam among them, do not read the biblical rebukes as Ramban did. There can be no question that to their understanding, the rebukes stand as an eternal warning, for all generations. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore Ramban's view of the Torah as an historical prophecy.

Two leading rabbis in *Eretz Yisrael* during the Second World War and the Holocaust of European Jewry stated decisively that there would be no third destruction in *Eretz Yisrael*. The Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Yisrael* at the time, Rav Yitzchak Isaac Ha-Levi Herzog, conveyed this message to his hosts in the US when he went there to raise money for the survival of the Jewish Yishuv and its institutions during the war. His hosts had already arranged an apartment for him and a congregation where he could serve in the rabbinate, and they begged him to stay, warning that the Nazi forces, under Rommel's leadership, were already about to invade Egypt and *Eretz Yisrael*. But Rav Herzog insisted on returning, with the firm belief that there would be no third destruction.

Rav Yosef Kahaneman, founder of Yeshivat Ponevezh in Bnei Brak, was dispatched to *Eretz Yisrael* by the Chafetz Chaim, armed with the verse that the Vilna Gaon was fond of repeating: "For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as God has said, and among the remnant those whom God shall call" (*Yoei* 3:5). He purchased tracts of land among the sand dunes of Ashdod, which were being offered for sale in great haste and at a low price by people who were terrified of the approaching German forces. Rav Kahaneman, too, repeated that according to our tradition, there will be no third destruction [in *Eretz Yisrael*].

I do not know what basis Rav Herzog had to be so certain of his position. It seems clear, though, that Rav Kahaneman's tradition, which he had received from the Chafetz Chaim, was the tradition of the Vilna Gaon and his disciples, whose foundations lie in Ramban's commentary on the Torah, as discussed above.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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