

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

\*\*\*\*\*

**PARASHAT BEHUKOTAI**

**The Torah's Response to Calamity**

By Rav Yair Kahn

**I. Reading the *Tokhacha* Slowly**

*Parashat Bechukotai* begins with a section of *berakhot* and *kelalot*, blessings and curses. It details some of the benefits Yisrael will receive if they adhere to the terms of the covenant, but also describes the terrible calamities and tragedies that will befall *Bnei Yisrael* if, *chaila*, they ignore those terms.

There is a custom that the section of the curses, known as the *tokhacha*, is read quickly during *keriat ha-Torah*, the public reading of the Torah. According to Rabbeinu Manoach (see Kesef Mishna, *Hilkhot Tefilla* 13:7), this custom is based on a *gemara* in *Megila* (31b) that describes Levi the son of Buti as mumbling while reading the curses. Rashi there explains that Levi read the *tokhacha* quickly and in a troubled manner because he was upset by the content.

It is undoubtedly difficult to dwell on the curses, especially for a Jew, like Levi the son of Buti, who lived in exile. Therefore, the custom to read the *tokhacha* quickly is certainly legitimate. However, this does not exempt us from studying the *tokhacha* privately in an attempt to understand Jewish suffering from a Torah perspective. With these thoughts in mind, let us take a closer look at the *tokhacha*.

**II. From Bad to Worse**

A careful reading of this section indicates that the Torah is describing a development. In the initial phase, Yisrael breaks the covenant by not following Torah law. This leads to punishment. If, in spite of the punishment, Yisrael still does not listen, further disasters will occur. The Torah repeats this two

more times. If Yisrael still does not listen, the fifth and final phase of punishment is mentioned. While the first four describe catastrophes that take place in the Land of Israel, the fifth describes the destruction of the *Mikdash* and the exile:

And I will make your cities a waste, and will make your sanctuaries desolate... And I will make the land desolate ... And I will scatter you among the nations.”  
(26:31-33)

This would seem to indicate that the order of the calamities is a progression of increasing severity. However, aside from the final segment, which is clearly more severe than those that precede it, the increasing severity of the previous sections is far from obvious.

In addition, it should be noted that from the second stage on, the Torah begins with an introduction that the calamities will be “seven for your sins.” Rashi attempts to enumerate seven catastrophes in each section, parallel to seven sins, however, in certain cases the attempt seems forced. The Ibn Ezra and the Rashbam both reject Rashi's interpretation and claim that the number seven in this context should not be taken as a precise numerical description, but rather a reflection of the enormity of the catastrophes, which seem to outweigh the wrongdoing of Yisrael many times over. The particular use of the number seven seems to be connected with *shemitta*, which comes every seventh year, and *yovel*, which is seven times seven years. This connects the punishment to the violation of the *shemitta*, a point that is noted explicitly in the fifth stage:

Then shall the land be paid her Sabbaths, as long as it lies desolate, and you are in your enemies' land, even then shall the land rest, and repay her Sabbaths.  
(26:34)

But this explanation is troubling. How does this interpretation fit in with the concept of divine justice? Shouldn't the punishment be no greater than the crime? In fact, it may have been this

difficulty that motivated Rashi's interpretation. On the other hand, if we adopt the explanation of the Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, this difficulty remains.

Let us return to the first four phases of the *tokhacha*, while bearing in mind that it describes a progression. The first stage mentions various illnesses and enemies who are in control. It is critical to note that the Torah does not refer to the loss of life here. The illnesses make the eyes fail and the soul languish, but death is not mentioned. The people are in terror, they fall without being chased, but they are not killed. Planting seeds becomes futile, as enemies eat the agricultural harvest, but death due to starvation is absent from this section. One is reminded of the situation described in *Sefer Shoftim*:

And the children of Yisrael did that which was evil in the sight of Hashem and Hashem delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years ... And so it was, when Yisrael had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east; they came up against them. And they encamped against them, and destroyed the produce of the earth till Aza and left no sustenance in Yisrael, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass ... And they came into the land to destroy it. And Yisrael became impoverished because of Midian; and the children of Yisrael cried unto Hashem. ([Shoftim 6:1-6](#))

They became impoverished, but they remained alive.

The second stage describes a drought: "I will make your heaven as iron and your earth as brass" ([Vayikra 26:19](#)). The famine depicted here includes the fruit of the trees, and thus goes further than phase one, which only discusses produce planted that year, such as wheat and vegetables. During the first phase, they will sow the land in vain, but apparently will be able to harvest the fruit of the tree; in the second phase, even the trees will not produce fruit. More significantly, the Torah outlines a reversal of the *berakha* section, in which we read: "Then I will give your rains in their season, and the land shall yield her produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit" (26:4).

Of particular note, is the opening statement of the second stage of curses: "I will destroy 'ge'on uzchem' – the pride

of your power" (26:19). As Rashi notes, this term, as used in Scripture, usually refers to the *Mikdash* (see [Yechezkel 24:21](#)). Surprisingly, R. Yosef ([Gittin 37a](#)) interprets this phrase as a reference to the wealthy. R. Yosef's explanation makes sense if we understand the *tokhacha* as a progression; the destruction of the *Mikdash* is listed only in the final phase, while in the two preliminary phases, only economic hardship is mentioned.

It is only in the third phase that death appears: "And I will send the beast of the field among you, which shall kill your children" (26:22). Here we find an additional reversal of the *berakhot*, in which we are told: "I will cause evil beasts to cease out of the land" (26:6). At this point, cattle are destroyed and travel becomes difficult as the paths become desolate. Moreover, the population is diminished, in contrast to the increase mentioned in the *berakhot* (26:9).

The fourth phase introduces the avenging sword, which is a reversal of "neither shall the sword go through your land" (26:6). The sword is apparently a reference to war, which is more devastating to Yisrael's sovereignty than death by famine. The masses, trying to flee the battle, will flock to overcrowded cities, which will become infested with infectious diseases. This, in turn, will enable the enemy to conquer the cities. At this point, the famine reaches a desperate stage as the staff of bread is destroyed and the little that you eat will not satisfy, in contrast to "and you shall eat your bread to satisfaction" (26:4).

The first four stages are combined by Scripture in one paragraph, while the Torah starts a new paragraph for the fifth and final stage. In this stage, the famine is so fierce that parents devour the flesh of their own children. The cities are laid waste and the *Mikdash* is destroyed. The people are sent into exile and the land becomes desolate. It is only at the end of the fifth and final stage that Yisrael confess their sins and Hashem remembers the covenant.

### III. If You Shall Act Towards Me with *Keri*

This description of the Torah should be contrasted with the parallel section found in the second paragraph of *keriat shema*:

Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be seduced, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them. And the anger of Hashem be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which Hashem gives you. ([Devarim 11:16-17](#))

In *keriat shema*, two opposites are described: the blessings if we adhere to the *mitzvot* and the punishment if we do not. In *Parashat Bechukotai*, the *berakhot* are all combined, while the curses are divided into separate phases. What is the significance of this division?

According to the Rambam, the *tokhacha* is one of the primary sources outlining the proper religious reaction to calamity. He codified his position at the beginning of *Hilkhot Ta'aniyot*, where he states that there is a Biblical obligation to cry out to Hashem at times of national distress:

This is of the paths of repentance, that when disaster strikes and they cry out on its account and sound the trumpets, all will know that they were harmed due to their evil deeds ... and this will bring the removal of the trouble from them. However, if they do not cry out and sound the trumpets, but rather say, "What occurred to us is the way of the world and this disaster is mere happenstance," this is a grossly insensitive reaction and will cause them to cling to their evil ways and the disaster will be compounded by additional disasters. This is what is written in the Torah: "And you shall act towards me with *keri*, and I will act towards you with the wrath of that *keri*." In other words, when I bring a disaster against you so that you shall repent, if you say it is *keri* (happenstance), I will add the wrath of that *keri*. (*Hilkhot Ta'aniyot* 1:2-3, see also Guide to the Perplexed 3:36)

It is clear that the Rambam considered the disasters mentioned in the *tokhacha* not just as punishment, but rather as a divine message. Limited by our finitude, we are not always capable of understanding divine justice. What we can grasp is the message, which calls us to return. We are obligated to hearken

to that message. If, on the other hand, we, *chalila*, ignore that message by claiming that the disaster occurred by chance, Hashem will cause greater catastrophes to occur.

When comparing *keriat shema* to the *tokhacha*, we generally consider the *tokhacha* as much harsher, due to the length and graphic detail of the disasters. However, according to the Rambam, the length and abundance of detail comes to invite repentance. In contrast to *keriat shema*, the calamities of the *tokhacha* are broken down incrementally. They are delivered in installments. The first two installments are alarming, but not fatal. By sounding the alarm, Yisrael is meant to repent and then there will be no need for subsequent disasters. Only if the alarm is ignored will Hashem cause greater disasters until Yisrael finally repents.

#### IV. The final phase

As we already noted, the fifth and final phase is also the most devastating. However, the distinction between this phase and those that precede it, is not only the severity. In the previous stages the calamities function as a warning. They broadcast a clear message that if Yisrael were to be religiously sensitive and realize that Hashem is the source of the disasters, this would lead to repentance, the calamities would subside and normal order would be restored.

Let us now consider the following *pasuk* found in the final phase:

And they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, in their treachery which they committed against Me, and also that they have acted towards me with *keri*.(26:40)

Finally Yisrael has heard the divine call. They have confessed their sins. We are ready for the redemptive message:

Then will I remember My covenant with Yaakov, and also My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham will I remember. (26:42)

Instead, we find a *pasuk* that precedes the redemption:

I also will treat them with *keri* and bring them into the land of their enemies; if then perchance their uncircumcised heart be humbled, and they then be paid the punishment of their iniquity. (*pasuk* 41)

This is a very difficult verse and many interpretations have been suggested. The explanations vary with respect to the exact meaning of the words.

But let us listen not only to the words, but to the melody of this statement. The Torah seems to be saying: You finally confessed your sins, but it's too late. I am no longer listening. We are reminded of *Parashat Vayelekh*, where it is written:

Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them; so that they will say in that day: Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us? ([Devarim 31:18](#))

The idea of *hester panim* (hiding of the divine countenance, as it were) seems to contradict the entire premise of the *tokhacha*. Hashem is not with us, trying to warn us so that we return to Him. Hashem is distant and hidden. We cry to Him, but He seems not to hear: "Even when I cry and plead, my prayers are blocked" (*Eikha* 3:8).

The first four phases describe calamities that function as warnings; "repent lest the *mikdash* be destroyed and the people exiled from the land". If we repent, the situation is reversible. It is analogous to one who, *chalila*, has an ill family member. He should pray and repent hoping for a speedy recovery. Once the relative dies, mourning, not prayer, is the appropriate reaction. The destruction of the *mikdash* and the *galut*, is no longer a warning. Prayer and *teshuvah* will not have an instantaneous effect. Normal order will not be restored immediately. (See the *shiur* on *Parashat* *Ki Tisa* <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha71/21-71kitisa.htm>). However, the covenant between Hashem and *Yisrael* is everlasting and survives even the destruction and the *galut*. Ultimately

Hashem remembers the covenant and brings His people back.

## V. I Will Remember the Original Covenant

The *tokhacha* ends:

These are the statutes and ordinances and laws, which Hashem made between Him and the children of Israel in **Har Sinai** by the hand of Moshe. (*Vaykira* 26:46)

As we noted in last week's *shiur*, according to the Ibn Ezra the specific reference to Har Sinai notes that the *tokhacha* is part of the covenant. According to the Ibn Ezra, this is the covenant that was forged when the first *luchot* were given and is documented at the end of *Parashat Mishpatim*.

The Ramban agrees with the Ibn Ezra that the reference to Har Sinai is due to the fact that the *tokhacha* is part of the Sinai covenant. However, in contrast to the Ibn Ezra, the Ramban claims that by making the *egel*, the first covenant was broken. Therefore, the Ramban suggests that the *tokhacha* is part of the second covenant that was forged when the second *luchot* were given. According to the Ramban, the first covenant is an ideal. *Yisrael* will adhere to the divine word and Hashem will elevate *Yisrael* and make of them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Human frailty and failings are not considered.

When *Yisrael* break the terms of the covenant by worshiping the *egel*, the first covenant is broken. The second covenant is forged together with the thirteen attributes ([Shemot 34:6-10](#)). The first of these attributes is a repetition of the tetragrammaton: "Hashem Hashem ..." The *gemara* explains this redundancy: "I am Him prior to the sin of man and I am Him after the sin of man and his repentance" (*Rosh Hashana* 17b).

The second covenant is not only tolerant of sin, the terms of the covenant itself are catered to survive sin. The Ramban writes:

*Hakadosh Barukh Hu* wanted to be stringent to them regarding this second covenant that there should be on them oaths and curses.

The first, ideal covenant that did not include oaths and curses, was cancelled when the terms were broken. The second covenant, which includes the *tokhacha*, deals with *Yisrael* breaking the terms of the covenant:

And if you shall reject My statutes, and if your soul abhor Mine ordinances, so that you will not do all My commandments, but break My covenant. (26:15)

The divine response is to cause *Yisrael* to return. Disaster will follow disaster, even if the catastrophes outweigh the wrongdoing of *Yisrael* sevenfold. The *mikdash* may be destroyed and the people sent into *galut*, but eventually *Yisrael* will return.

The *tokhacha* concludes:

And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am Hashem their God. (26:44).

Despite the destruction and death, the devastation and exile, the covenant will not be broken.

But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am Hashem. (26:45).

**Visit our website: <http://vbm-torah.org>**