

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The bulk of our Parasha deals with the "tochecha" (lit. rebuke), the punishments awaiting us for not "listening to G-d" (Vayikra 26:14), not "doing all of His commandments" (ibid), despising His statutes (26:15), and abhorring His laws (ibid), to the extent that "we don't do all of His commandments, to break His covenant" (ibid).

The Torah describes five stages of insubordination and the resulting punishments. The first stage is described in the verses referenced above, followed by its punishment (26:16-17). The second stage—continuing to "not listen to G-d" despite being punished, and being punished more severely—is then described (26:18-20), followed by a third stage (26:21-22). In this stage, a concept included in the final three stages is introduced: "kery." The overwhelming majority of commentators understand this to be "mikreh," a word often translated as "chance," "randomness," or "happenstance." A more precise definition is "unintended consequence" (see Netziv on 26:21). The action itself may have been intended, but not every consequence of that action was the reason the action was taken. For example, the reason someone jumps into a swimming pool (rather than walking in or climbing down the ladder) might be to cool off more quickly, or to get used to the water more quickly, or because it's more fun. A consequence of jumping into the water is that it creates a splash; water will be displaced even if the one who jumps in would prefer that it wouldn't be. A non-swimmer walking by the pool might get wet from the splash (a risk taken by anyone walking near a pool) even though that wasn't the intent of the person who jumped into the pool. The action (jumping into the pool) was intended; the consequence (someone else getting wet) was not. Any consequence that was not specifically intended is the result of "mikreh." Attributing the suffering described in our Parasha to "mikreh" (i.e. natural disasters and/or others trying to harm us), rather than recognizing that it was sent by G-d as a punishment for our sins (and changing our ways as a result), brings the next round of punishment upon us.

The fourth stage of sinning/punishment also begins with our attributing the suffering to "mikreh" (26:23), but this time it causes G-d to act with us through "mikreh" as well (26:24). This indicates that as

a punishment for attributing G-d's involvement with us to "mikreh," He will no longer be involved with us, no longer protecting us from the consequences of "mikreh," thereby subjecting us to whatever might occur based on the laws of nature (e.g. earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, drought) and whatever damage enemies might be able to inflict upon us. In fact, this is how many commentators (e.g. Alshich and Kli Yakar) explain this verse. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch adds that the Nation of Israel could not exist, and cannot survive, without G-d's constant supervision and intervention; by nature it (the concept of a "holy nation") would fall apart. Therefore, G-d abandoning us will inevitably lead to our downfall. Because the fourth stage also includes direct punishment (26:24-26), not just being left to "mikreh," Abarbanel says that this stage is a double-whammy; we suffer the consequences of "mikreh" and get punished directly.

The fifth stage (26:27-39) adds an element that raises a difficulty regarding this concept of "mikreh." Although we continue to attribute our suffering to "mikreh" (26:27), G-d responds with "a wrath of mikreh" (26:28). If the whole idea of "mikreh" is lack of involvement, how can it have any "wrath?" The implication of this modifier is that there is an intent behind the "mikreh" affecting us, making it harsher than it otherwise would have been. How can there be intent behind an "unintended consequence?"

Although most commentators explain "mikreh" in 26:21 (and 26:23 and 26:27) as "unintended consequence," a result of things other than G-d punishing us, most do not explain G-d's response (26:24) as letting "mikreh" dictate what happens to us. Or Hachayim, for example, says that what happens to us will appear to be "mikreh" (even though it really isn't) because the punishment won't seem to match our sins. If the punishment is not the result of "mikreh" (only appearing to us to be), there is no issue with having intent ("wrath") behind it. Rokayach says the punishment that results from our attributing things to "mikreh" is G-d putting more of what we called "mikreh" upon us. It's as if G-d responds by saying, "oh yeah, you think that was 'mikreh,' well here's some more." If the "mikreh" in G-d's response is not actually mikreh," but a euphemism for the punishments we attribute to "mikreh," there really is intent behind all of the punishments, allowing the "mikreh" in the fifth stage to be purposely harsher. This is likely what Rambam (Hilchos Taanis 13) and Rabbeinu Bache (26:21) mean

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when they say that if we attribute the suffering to "mikreh" G-d will inflict upon us even more "mikreh;" He will inflict upon us even more of what we called "mikreh," which was really direct punishment, by directly punishing us even more.

[Rambam is clear that the suffering experienced by a community is the result of G-d's direct punishment, even though he is also clear (Moreh Nevuchim 3:18 and 3:51) that, for most people, suffering is often the result of "mikreh." (Contrary to the common perception, the mainstream approach of the Rishonim is that most people are not worthy of "hashgacha pratis," individualized supervision; it is not a position unique to Rambam.) On an individual level, most things that happen to most people can be attributed to "mikreh." On a national (communal) level, however, they cannot. The more people affected, and the harsher that affect is, the more likely it is that G-d would have prevented the suffering from happening if it wasn't a punishment.]

There are other approaches to explain how G-d could send a fury of "mikreh" if "sending" negates it being "unintended." Abarbanel suggests that the "kery" in this verse (26:28) doesn't refer to the nature (pardon the pun) of the suffering, but what the suffering is a punishment for. In this fifth stage, we are being punished for having attributed the previous punishments to "mikreh;" it is a "wrath" sent to punish us for calling it "mikreh." Alshich says that denying that previous punishments came from G-d creates a "koach ha'tuma," a spiritual force of the "dark side," and that force will inflict additional damage. It is the "wrath" (damage) resulting from the "koach ha'tuma" that came about from our attributing things to "mikreh" that causes this suffering. Kli Yakar explains that the results of "mikreh," being subject to whatever would occur without G-d's intervention, can be both good and bad. Disease may spread to otherwise innocent people if they do not merit the divine intervention necessary to protect them from it. On the other hand, people undeserving of wealth could become wealthy if circumstances dictated that they strike it rich. Normally, there are many more things that could go wrong if left unprotected than could go right (and the extent of what goes wrong far more severe), so being "ne'ezav (abandoned) l'mikreh" is a bad thing. Nevertheless, some "positive" things could occur in a state of abandonment that wouldn't have

occurred if G-d was making sure only things that were deserved happen. In the fifth stage, the Kli Yakar says, only those things that are bad are allowed to occur; this is what is meant by "wrath of mikreh." Similarly, Shem Olam (Rabbi Eliezer Lichtenstein, 18th Century) says that "wrath of mikreh" means that G-d will become involved enough with what would result from "mikreh" to make sure it's even worse than it otherwise would have been.

One of the idiosyncrasies of the expression in our Parasha that includes the concept of "mikreh" is that it always includes "going (or walking) with." If "mikreh" refers to abandonment, it should not be "with." Alshich and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch tell us how we can be "going with G-d" if we are attributing things to "mikreh" by explaining that we are still observing something; Alshich (26:23 and 26:27) says the last thing we stopped doing was studying the Torah (even as we committed so many horrible sins), and Rav Hirsch (26:21) says that we kept the mitzvos, but only when they served our needs (not in order to do G-d's will). Alshich says that G-d was still with us (on some level) till the very end, even as He left us to "mikreh." If G-d was still "with us" despite not protecting us from "mikreh," He didn't necessarily have to allow everything that "mikreh" would have dictated to occur. Just as, according to Kli Yakar and Shem Olam, G-d could tinker with "mikreh" to the extent that only bad things happen, or that things happened in a harsher way, in the fourth stage G-d could have allowed most of what "mikreh" dictated to occur, while still protecting us from the extremely harsh things. When we still didn't change, G-d no longer protected us from the harshest outcomes of "mikreh," a state referred to as the "wrath of mikreh."

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the most obscure Festivals of the Hebrew calendar is Lag B'omer, (the 33rd day of the count of the Omer between Passover and Shavuot). It comes as a welcome respite from the days of mourning which precede and according to some customs also follow it, and it is therefore a popular day for weddings, yet its origins are shrouded in mystery.

Our legal codes (Shulhan Arukh Orah Haim 493:1) record that 24,000 students of the famed Rabbi Akiba died during the period between Passover and Shavuot (either in a plague or in the Bar Kochba rebellion and its aftermath), and they did not die on Lag B'omer. In Israel the day is marked by massive visitations to the grave of Rav Shimon Bar Yohai in Meron and very large bonfires by the teenagers which makes Efrat resemble a pyromaniac's paradise. But does the absence of tragedy for one day justify such a national celebration?

The Hidah (OT 223) maintains that Lag B'omer is the date of Rav Shimon bar Yohai's death, which would explain all of the celebrations around his grave; indeed, our mystical tradition records that his last day on earth was the day in which the Almighty revealed to him the Holy Zohar. And one historian suggests that Lag B'omer is the day in which Rav Shimon bar Yohai left the cave - which followed the death of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, the end of the Hadrian persecutions, and therefore the cessation of the horrific persecution and execution of Rabbi Akiba's disciples as the tragic conclusion to the abortive Bar Kochba rebellion!

Permit me to suggest an added significance to our celebrating Lag B'omer as the day on which Rav Shimon bar Yohai left the cave. The Talmud (B.T. Shabbat 33b) records a conversation between three disciples of Rabbi Akiba: one praised Rome for her market-places, her bath-houses and her bridges; the second was silent; Rav Shimon denigrated these accomplishments, insisting that the market-places encouraged prostitution, the bath-houses were only for individual hedonistic satisfaction and the bridges levied exorbitant taxes on the average citizen. The Rabbi who praised Rome was rewarded with a ministerial position, the Rabbi who was silent was exiled, and Rav Shimon was sentenced to death.

Rav Shimon and his son escaped to a cave where a fig tree and a well of water were miraculously created to provide their nourishment. They remained hidden away for twelve years, totally absorbed in the study of Torah. When Elijah the Prophet informed them that the Roman Emperor was dead and his evil decree rescinded, they left the cave - only to see a farmer tilling the ground. "How can you forsake the eternal world of Torah and occupy yourself in the temporal world of agriculture?" criticized Rav Shimon - and a fire emanated from his eyes, about to consume the hopeless farmer. "You left the cave to destroy my world," thundered a Divine voice. 'Return to the cave from whence you came!' They returned to the cave for 12 months. They then exited for the second time; and it was Friday, close to dusk, and they saw an old man running with two myrtle twigs. "One is for, 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy', and the other is for 'Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy,'" he explained. They returned to the world in peace.

Apparently, the old man taught them that even agricultural activity could be sanctified since myrtle twigs could be used to enhance the Sabbath table and that every area of the material world must be uplifted during the six days of the week if we are eventually to be able to observe and experience the redemptive bliss of a world which is wholly Sabbath.

The Talmudic story doesn't end there. Rav Shimon decided that since he had been miraculously saved from death - he had been granted the privilege of leaving the cave alive - he ought to "repair something" in gratitude to the Almighty. He noted that when Jacob

had emerged whole from his encounter with Esau (the fore-runner of Rome), he also repaired his city: either by establishing market-places, or building bath-houses, or minting coins. Mark well that Rav Shimon now realizes that the most special of the Biblical Patriarchs dedicated his creative energies to precisely those aspects of society for which he had denigrated Rome thirteen years before: market places, bath-houses, and moneys which could be used to pay taxes. Rav Shimon then goes on to purify a parcel of land which had been of a questionable status (Safek Tamei), and had therefore been previously considered to be defiled.

Rav Shimon learned a crucial lesson: true sanctity comes about not by escaping the material, incomplete world of the present, not by divorcing Torah from society, but rather by involving Torah in all of the regular daily, worldly pursuits and "Kedoshifying" them. True sanctity means going into a place of questionable purity and making it pure!

Let us now return to Lag B'omer. The days between Passover and Shavuot are days of repentance and return to Torah and Israel which define our march towards redemption. Tragically, we have fallen short of our goal, and these days have become days of mourning, culminating in the worst tragedy of Jewish exile, the holocaust, with Yom Hashoah just a few days after Passover.

But this period has also seen Israeli Independence Day and Jerusalem Day, specifically as new festivals in our fortunate generation. Rav Shimon bar Yohai's lesson of Lag B'omer when he left the cave for the second time is especially poignant and pregnant with meaning today. We dare not turn our eyes away from the miraculous gift of the Jewish State because it has not yet reached spiritual perfection, because it is still a work in progress brought about by G-d and special individuals who accomplish much but falter as well. We must learn from Rav Shimon bar Yohai that the highest sanctity lies in entering an area of questionable status and working towards purifying it, in turning the "beginning of the sprouting of the redemption" into the complete redemption of a world of peace and harmony. © 2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha contains the "small" tochacha - the warning of the dire results that will befall the Jewish people if they violate their trust and covenant with the Lord. To look at the parsha superficially and coldly it seems to imply an all or nothing situation. Great blessings and prosperity can be our lot on one hand and terrible tragedy is the other side of that coin. But is that the true reality of our history?

Even a cursory knowledge of Tanach will indicate that most of Jewish life in First Temple times

wavered between good times and not so good times. Eventually the breaches of the covenant were so egregious and cumulative that the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were exiled to Babylonia and Egypt. Since this was the fulfillment of the warnings of the "short" tochacha the exile itself was also a "short" one-only seventy years.

It seems that the breaches of the covenant do not occasion immediate and sudden punishment and tragedy. Jewish history has very few incidents of instantaneous punishment or reward. It is always part of a long process of events that inevitably lead to the events-both good and sad-that are so graphically described in the parsha of this week.

All human actions activate consequences. The parsha of this week describes the consequences and eventual results of loyalty to the covenant and betrayal of it. It would take almost nine centuries from the time of Sinai until the eventual bill would have to be paid. That is a very long process in terms of time.

People living in the midst of that period of time would be unable to recognize that any process was going on if not for the stark all-or-nothing approach that the Torah describes for us in this week's parsha. The covenant between G-d and Israel is eternal. It creates consequences and results-again both beneficial or tragic-that are unavoidable.

The main sin that is described in the breach of the covenant by Israel is always the substitution of foreign gods, alien values, foolish whims of the times, for G-d's Torah and the worship of G-d alone. Once there were foreign gods that were represented by actual statues, idols, icons and other such physical representations.

Much of our world has outgrown these forms of idolatry and this is due greatly to the unremitting struggle of Judaism against such practices. However in our current milieu these childish forms of idol worship have been replaced by the adoption of systems of values that are completely antithetical to Judaism and the Torah.

These value systems are coated in the garb of modernity and progressivism even though they are only a rehash of much of what was acceptable in ancient classical times amongst the then ruling societies in the world. Judaism has been distorted by many to accommodate their newly obtained liberal and humanistic values system, so that these distortions have become almost Orwellian in nature.

The Soviet Union and its fellow travelers taught the world that words like democracy, peace, paradise and progressive can be manipulated to mean the exact opposite of what they were intended to mean. The Soviet Union may be gone but its evil, anti-Semitism, and scorn for Jews lives on. We should be careful not to fall into the trap of modern idolatry lest again untoward consequences for us may arise. ©2011 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer

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CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

There is one aspect of Christianity that Jews, if we are to be honest, must reject, and that Christians, most notably Pope John XXIII, have begun to reject. It is the concept of rejection itself, the idea that Christianity represents G-d's rejection of the Jewish people, the "old Israel".

This is known technically as Supersession or Replacement Theology, and it is enshrined in such phrases as the Christian name for the Hebrew Bible, "The Old Testament." The Old Testament means the testament, or covenant, once in force but no longer. On this view, G-d no longer wants us to serve Him the Jewish way, through the 613 commandments, but a new way, through a New Testament. His old chosen people were the physical descendants of Abraham. His new chosen people are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, in other words, not Jews but Christians.

The results of this doctrine were devastating. They were chronicled after the Holocaust by the French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac. More recently, they have been set out in works like Rosemary Ruether's Faith and Fratricide, and James Carroll's Constantine's Sword. They led to centuries of persecution and to Jews being treated as a pariah people. Reading Jules Isaac's work led to a profound metanoia or change of heart on the part of Pope John XXIII, and ultimately to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which transformed relations between the Catholic Church and the Jews.

I don't want to explore the tragic consequences of this belief here, but rather its untenability in the light of the sources themselves. To our surprise, they key statement occurs in perhaps the darkest passage of the entire Torah, the curses of *Bechukotei*. Here in the starkest possible terms are set out the consequences of the choices the people Israel makes. If they stay faithful to G-d they will be blessed. But if they are faithless the results will be defeat, devastation, destruction and despair. The rhetoric is relentless, the warning unmistakable, the vision terrifying. Yet at the very end come these utterly unexpected lines: "And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their G-d. 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 heathen, that I might be their G-d: I am the Lord." (Lev. 26:44-45)

The people may be faithless to G-d but G-d will never be faithless to the people. He may punish them but he will not abandon them. He may judge them harshly but he will not forget their ancestors, who followed Him, nor will he break the covenant he made with them. G-d does not break His promises even if we break ours.

The point is fundamental. The Talmud describes a conversation between the Jewish exiles in Babylon and a prophet: "Samuel said: Ten men came and sat down before the prophet. He told them, 'Return and repent.' They answered, 'If a master sells his slave, or a husband divorces his wife, has one a claim upon the other' Then the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the prophet, 'Go and say to them, Thus says the Lord, 'Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.'" (Isaiah 50:1; Sanhedrin 105a)

The Talmud places in the mouths of the exiles an argument later repeated by Spinoza, that the very fact of exile terminated the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. G-d had rescued them from Egypt and thereby become, in a strong sense, their only sovereign, their king. But now, having allowed them to suffer exile, He had abandoned them and they were now under the rule of another king, the ruler of Babylon. It was as if He had sold them to another master, or as if Israel were a wife G-d had divorced. Having sold or divorced them, G-d could have no further claim on them.

It is precisely this that the verse in Isaiah- "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you"-denies. G-d has not divorced, sold or abandoned His people. That too is the meaning of the promise at the end of the curses of Bechukotai: "And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away... and break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their G-d." G-d may send his people into exile but they remain his people, and he will bring them back.

This too is the meaning of the great prophecy in Jeremiah: "This is what the Lord says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, / who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, / who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar -- / the Lord Almighty is his name: / 'Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,' declares the Lord, / 'will Israel ever cease being a nation before me.' / This is what the Lord says:???Only if the heavens above can be measured / and the foundations of the earth below be searched out / will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' / declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 31:35-37)

A central theme of the Torah, and of Tanakh as a whole, is the rejection of rejection. G-d rejects humanity, saving only Noah, when he sees the world full

of violence. Yet after the Flood He vows: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). That is the first rejection of rejection.

Then comes the series of sibling rivalries. The covenant passes through Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau. But G-d hears Hagar's and Ishmael's tears. Implicitly he hears Esau's also, for He later commands, "Do not hate an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Esau] because he is your brother" (Deut 23:7).

Finally G-d brings it about that Levi, one of the children Jacob curses on his deathbed, "Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel" (Gen. 49:6), becomes the father of Israel's spiritual leaders, Moses, Aaron and Miriam. From now on all Israel are chosen. That is the second rejection of rejection.

Even when Israel suffer exile and find themselves "in the land of their enemies" they are still the children of G-d's covenant, which He will not break because G-d does not abandon His people. They may be faithless to Him. He will not be faithless to them. That is the third rejection of rejection, stated in our parsha, reiterated by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, axiomatic to our faith in a G-d who keeps His promises.

Thus the claim on which Replacement or Supersession theology is based- that G-d rejects His people because they rejected Him-is unthinkable in terms of Abrahamic monotheism. G-d keeps His word even if others break theirs. G-d does not, will not, abandon His people. The covenant with Abraham, given content at Mount Sinai, and renewed at every critical juncture in Israel's history since, is still in force, undiminished, unqualified, unbreakable.

The Old Testament is not old. G-d's covenant with the Jewish people is still alive, still strong. Acknowledgement of this fact has transformed the relationship between Christians and Jews and helped wipe away many centuries of tears. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

This week's haftarah teaches us a profound lesson in trust and faith in Hashem. The prophet Yirmiyahu introduces the haftarah by proclaiming, "Hashem is my strength, my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble." Yirmiyahu proceeds and admonishes the Jewish people for pursuing foreign avenues and engaging in strange practices for security. He warns them that they are subject to forfeiting their wealth and possessions because of their public involvement in idolatry.

He then delivers a crushing blow in the name of Hashem and says, "And you will forsake your land which you are to blame for mistreating the inheritance I

gave you and you will be enslaved to your enemies in a foreign land."(17:4) This is the dreadful prophecy about their pending exile from their precious homeland, Eretz Yisroel. Yet, Yirmiyahu devotes his attention to one specific detail as the cause of their exile. He immediately follows with serious reprimand about trust and says, "Cursed is the person who trusts in man...and turns his heart away from Hashem... Blessed is the person who trusts in Hashem." The juxtaposition of these words suggests that the Jewish exile was caused by lack of trust. Apparently, the previous criticism of mistreating the land related to this fault. Rashi develops this and explains that the admonition referred to their failure to properly observe Shmita laws. Yirmiyahu chastised them for mistreating their inheritance by refusing to return it to its true owner during Shmita.

This explanation requires serious reflection. Although the mitzvah of Shmita is undoubtedly significant, it seems to be treated with extreme severity. The prophet equates lack of Shmita observance with total lack of faith in Hashem. This suggests that one who does not properly adhere to Shmita laws has no trust and faith in Hashem!? This is difficult to digest after considering the severe demands of Shmita. During that year, one may not exert any effort towards his personal sustenance and livelihood. Hashem demands that one place his total faith and trust in Him. If one does not achieve this lofty level and fails to display total faith can he be compared to an agnostic possessing no faith?

We can raise similar concern regarding the repercussions of profiting from Shmita fruit. In addition to Shmita's agricultural prohibition one is prohibited from engaging in any profitable transaction with fruit grown during the Shmita year. The Talmud predicts the severe hardships one will endure for violating this prohibition. His first repercussion will be his sale of all his fields and possessions. This process could continue and include the sale of his home and eventually even result in the sale of his daughter as a maid servant. (see Kiddushin 20a) These punishments seem extremely severe relative to their offense. There are many grave sins whose consequences are trivial in comparison to those of Shmita violations. What establishes Shmita so significant as to warrant these responses?

We can shed light on this entire subject through the Malbim's classic commentary on this week's haftorah. He explains that the prophet discusses three approaches to one's faith in Hashem. Yirmiyahu showers praise and blessing upon one who places his total trust in Hashem. Although this person undoubtedly involves himself in securing his sustenance he realizes that Hashem is ultimately his true provider. A second prevalent attitude comes from those of dual allegiance, who place their trust in Hashem and in their personal efforts. Although this is certainly not a supreme form of service and doesn't receive words of praise it is

nonetheless acceptable. There exists yet a third attitude amongst some, one that is totally unacceptable and condemned by the prophet. Yirmiyahu curses one who places total trust in his personal involvement without even including Hashem as a factor in the equation. This person totally disregards Hashem's involvement and believes that he obtains success and fortune exclusively through personal efforts.

These insightful words place the mitzvah of Shmita in its proper perspective. Every seventh year Hashem reminds us that He is constantly involved in our lives and sustenance. Hashem facilitates this recognition by restricting us from personal involvement in our livelihood for an entire year. One who adheres to Shmita's restrictions clearly demonstrates his total faith in Hashem as his provider. However, one who violates Shmita's laws shows his total belief and trust in his personal efforts. Hashem absolutely banned these efforts during that year and will undoubtedly have no part in helping them bear fruits. Such activity reflects a defiant attitude that Hashem need not be involved for one to succeed. He expresses to all that irrespective of Hashem's approval or involvement these efforts will nevertheless produce as usual.

This totally unacceptable attitude inevitably engages Hashem in a clear demonstration that all sustenance and provisions are ultimately His doing. Hashem's response to such misguided individuals will be to gradually force them to sell their possessions in exchange for basic sustenance. This process helps them realize that all possessions come from Hashem and that He is their sole provider. A similar response will be given to the Jewish people when they display this defiant attitude. Hashem will remind them that He controls their lives and not themselves. Their failure to observe Shmita laws will cause them to forfeit their privilege of living in Eretz Yisroel, the land of Divine Providence. Conceivably whoever merits to live in Eretz Yisroel should sense Hashem's closeness and direct involvement in every step of their lives. If the entire nation fails to recognize this reality it truly has nothing to gain from dwelling in the king's palace. Hashem will therefore banish the people from His presence until they recognize and learn to appreciate His active role in their lives.

If we could only internalize this lesson our lives would be so much better. May we soon merit to return to our father's table with His full return to His people in the nearest future. © 2011 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion clearly states that good people are rewarded while evil people are punished. In the words of the Torah: "If you keep my

commandments...then I will give your rains in their season...but if you will not listen to Me...I will bring terror over you." (Leviticus Chapter 26)

Throughout the ages, this principle has raised difficulty. After all, there are countless examples of good people who suffer and evil people who flourish. This is the famous philosophical question of tzaddik ve-ra lo, the righteous who suffer. Doesn't this reality run contrary to what the Torah states in our portion?

Another problem with the concept of reward and punishment is the directive "not to serve the Master for a reward, but to serve Him with no reward in mind." (Ethics 1:3) This seems to contradict our portion which suggests that good deeds are performed for reward.

One way to approach these questions is to imagine that good people are always rewarded and evil people are automatically punished. In such a world, freedom of choice would be non-existent. If for every ten dollars one gives to charity one would receive twenty dollars-everyone would give charity. Similarly, if every time one speaks slander one's tongue would cleave to the palate-no one would speak wrongfully.

Indeed, in a world of precise reward and punishment, humankind would be bereft of freedom of choice. Since freedom of choice is central to the human condition, it follows, that in a world of exact reward and punishment, our very humanity, would be jeopardized.

But how can one explain this week's portion which clearly speaks of reward for good deeds and punishment for misdeeds?

Rav Ahron Soloveitchik of blessed memory suggests that the answer may lie in understanding that there are two types of reward and punishment. There is reward and punishment on an individual level and then there is reward and punishment on a collective level.

On the individual level, as the Talmud states, there is no reward for doing a mitzvah in this world- that comes in the world hereafter. (Kiddushin 39b) A promise of reward in the hereafter will not compel individuals to act properly. Human choice would remain intact.

In this world, however, reward and punishment does operate on a collective level. When one does something positive, the larger community benefits. Similarly, when one does something negative, the community suffers.

Note that in this week's portion when discussing reward and punishment, the text is in the plural. Similarly, in the second portion of the Shema recited morning and night, reward and punishment is in the plural. In fact, when reward is written in the singular it refers to an individual's portion in the world to come. An example is "Honor your father and mother that your days may be long." (Exodus 20:1)

We have come full circle. The good can suffer in this world as there is no exact reward and punishment for individuals. However, when doing the

right thing, we do so not necessarily for ourselves, but for the benefit of the community.

In a world that emphasizes the primacy of the self, our portion tells us that fully controlling the destiny of the self is not possible. However, the portion tells us that as a "we," we have tremendous power. We have the ability to wreak destruction on the world, but we also have the power to infuse it with peace and goodness. © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

“If you will go in My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them; then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will yield its fruit. Threshing will overtake the vintage for you, and the vintage will last until the sowing; you will eat your bread to satiety and you will dwell securely in your land. And I will provide peace in the land...” (Vayikra 26:3-6)

"I will provide peace: You might say, 'Here is food and here is drink! (and peace is just another blessing) (However) If there is no peace there is nothing! The verse says after all this (material blessing of plenty) I will provide peace in the land...'. From here we see that peace is as weighty as everything..." (Rashi)

Why is peace a heavenly provision? Isn't it just a psychological state of mind? What then is the gift of "Shalom"? Our sages tell us that HASHEM found no greater vessel for containing blessings other than "Shalom". What does it mean that peace is a vessel and how is equal to all the other blessings?

Years back an Israeli friend Yossi had organized for me a number of speaking engagements. He was also the driver, designated to get me to these events. One frigid night as we started our long journey to deep into the heart of Long Island, I happened to notice that we were extremely low on gas. I let Yossi know but he dismissed my concerns telling me that we'd be ok. Somehow, miraculously we made it to the class without incident. Even more amazingly though we made it almost all the way home as well. I nudged Yossi numerous times to stop for gas but he insisted that we wait to fill up in New Jersey where the price of a gallon of gas is always a little bit cheaper than New York.

We just crossed over the George Washington Bridge and entered New Jersey and lo and behold we spotted a gas station. There was a sign indicating no u turn so Yossi made the u turn and we pulled in the gas station at about 1: AM.

Since in New Jersey it is illegal to pump your own gas the attendant was forced out of the warm of his tiny booth. There striding to our car was a dark African immigrant with a wool cap pulled down almost covering

his eyes. He seemed weary and annoyed by the extreme cold as he approached our car. At this point I told Yossi, "Watch, I'm gonna make his night!" Yossi cautioned me with a sense of alarm, "Don't tip'm! We came here to save a few bucks!" I assured him I had nothing like that in mind but maybe something better. I was going to add a little warmth of humanity into what is otherwise a pretty clinical relationship.

I then picked up the two empty Snapple bottles we had been drinking from and stepping out from the car I approached the gas station attendant and asked him, "Do you recycle these or do they go here in the garbage can?" He mumbled, "They all go to the same place!" (That was my queue!) I said to him, "Everything comes from the same place and everything goes to the same place!" He nodded in agreement signaling to me that he understood some of the depth of what I had said, so I continued, "We all come from one place and we all go to one place! We all come from G-d and we all go back to G-d!" Now he was really listening deeply and so I took license to explain a little further. "If you understand that, then even if you have nothing, you have everything. If you have everything else, and you don't have that then you have nothing!" At this point Yossi was urging him to fill it up with regular but I felt I had filled him and myself up with something super.

Shalom is one of the names of G-d! It comes from a place of supernal awareness of that reality. It's not an additional blessing. It is the key to all the other blessings. If you have it, even if you have nothing else, you have everything. If you lack it, even if you have all else you have nothing. Shalom is the best vessel to hold all the good things in life. In truth the greatest gift that you can give someone is to show them what they already have! So it is that Shalom is the gift of all gifts!
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SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

This week's parashah describes the exile and other punishments which, G-d forbid, befall Bnei Yisrael if they fail to keep the mitzvot, in general, and the mitzvah of shemittah, in particular. We read (26:34), "Then the land will be appeased for its sabbaticals during all the years of its desolation, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals." (According to Ramban z"l, this prophecy refers primarily to the exile which followed the destruction of the first Bet Hamikdash, while the tochachah / rebuke that appears in Parashat Ki Tavo refers primarily to our present exile, following the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash.)

R' Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein z"l (1848-1896; Nowy Dwor, Poland) notes that the last phrase in the above verse ("then the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals") seems to be redundant. He explains:

The sin of neglecting the shemittah is two-fold: First, there is the fact that one has neglected G-d's command, and, second, there is the fact that one has missed an opportunity to testify that G-d is the Master of the Land. To rectify this sin, one must do two things: First, one must let the Land rest for as many years as it would have rested had the shemittah been properly observed, and, second, we must be exiled. This is middah k'negged middah / measure for measure; since we have failed to acknowledge G-d's ownership of the Land, we may not be in the Land. The redundancy emphasizes that the exile will be exactly as long as is needed to accomplish these two purposes; as related in Divrei Ha'yamim (II 36:21), "This [exile] was in fulfillment of the word of Hashem... all the years of its desolation it rested, to the completion of seventy years." (Shem Olam)

"If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments..." (26:3) Rashi writes that "If you will follow My decrees" refers to toiling in Torah study. If so, writes R' Akiva Yosef Schlesinger z"l (Hungary and Yerushalayim; died 1922), we can understand why this verse follows immediately after the verse, "My Sabbaths you shall observe." Specifically, the Midrash Tanna D'vei Eliyahu states that the primary time for Torah study is on Shabbat, when one is free from working. (Torat Yechiel)

"I will turn my attention to you..." (26:9) Rashi z"l explains: [G-d is saying, so-to-speak,] "I will turn away from all My affairs to pay your reward."

R' Yechezkel Landau z"l (1713-1793; rabbi of Prague) writes that the heightened Divine attention to us that is described in this verse is what we refer to when we speak of G-d resting His "Shechinah" among us. When the Jewish People do the will of G-d, He focuses His attention on us, which causes increased blessings to flow to the Jewish People and, incidentally, to the entire world. On the other hand, if we sin, then he removes His Shechinah from us and sustains us only incidentally to sustaining the rest of the world. (She'eilot U'teshuvot Noda B'Yehuda Vol. II, O.C. No. 107)

Pirkei Avot

Ben Zoma says, "Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion." (Ch.4) R' Yoel Sirkes z"l (the Bach; 1561-1640) explains: Every person's earnings are made up of two parts-the portion that a person is obligated to give as terumah, ma'aser, and charity, and the portion that is his to enjoy. Some people are not happy unless they keep both shares for themselves, but a truly wealthy person is the one who is content with keeping his own portion and giving the other portion to its rightful recipients. (Meishiv Nefesh: Introduction)

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