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קול תורה

Parashat BeChukotay

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WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

by *Rabbi Yaakov Blau*

The beginning of Parashat BeChukotay has a lengthy description of the rewards one receives for doing the Mitzvot. However, all of the rewards are of a physical nature. Given that the spiritual rewards that result from Shemirat HaMitzvot would certainly seem to be the primary ones, their absence is striking.

Abarbanel quotes many approaches to help resolve this difficulty. He quotes Rambam, who writes that our Parashah is not actually discussing rewards and punishments. Rather, it is discussing things that enable further Avodat Hashem, such as getting rain and having an abundance of produce. It is far easier to focus on one's spiritual life if one does not need to share that focus as much on one's physical needs. By the same token, not receiving a physical reward for doing Mitzvot serves as an impediment to further spiritual growth. This approach maintains that the Torah specifically did not want to mention reward and punishment in the context of doing what is right. The reason for this is that one's Avodat Hashem should be motivated by wanting to do what is right, not just because one wants to receive some form of payback later on.

Alternatively, Abarbanel quotes the Ibn Ezra's opinion, which claims that spiritual rewards are too esoteric of an idea for the average person to comprehend, and therefore would not be an appropriate incentive to do what is right. The Torah was forced to use physical descriptions in order for it to be accessible to the common man.

Rav Se'adyah Gaon has a different perspective on the issue. He believes that the Torah was trying to counter the claims of idolaters. It was often during the times of the Tanach that idolaters promised all kinds of lavish physical rewards for those who subscribed to their beliefs. The Torah therefore had to reassure the people that they would not be losing out for being monotheists. Rav Se'adyah Gaon quotes a Passuk in Yirmiyahu (44:18) that seems to show that this fear was justified. That Passuk references the Jews having gone to Egypt after Gedaliah's assassination, even

though Yirmiyahu warned them not to do so, because they believed they were better off when they served Avodah Zarah. It is exactly this type of attitude that the Torah is attempting to prevent by promising physical rewards. In order to buttress this approach, Rav Se'adyah Gaon quotes several instances in Chumash where an admonition not to serve Avodah Zarah is followed by a promise of physical rewards. Such a linkage suggests that the need to list physical rewards is a reaction to the promises of the idolaters.

The final opinion quoted by Abarbanel is that of Ramban, who differentiates between individual and communal rewards. For individual rewards, spiritual rewards are the ultimate goal. However, a group can be rewarded together only in a physical way. Furthermore, when a community does well economically, everyone in the group benefits, not just the righteous people. On the flip side, physical punishments are communal as well. If there is a drought or an invasion by a foreign army, everyone is adversely affected, even those who are not evil. This approach believes that there are two types of descriptions of rewards in the Torah. Many times, such as in our Parashah, rewards are directed to the Jewish people as a whole and are therefore of a physical nature. However, sometimes rewards are directed to individuals, such as the promise of long life for honoring one's parents and Shiluach HaKan. Working with the understanding that the promise of long life is actually referring to long life in Olam HaBa, these rewards are meant to be spiritual.

While all of Abarbanel's approaches are meant to discuss keeping the Mitzvot in general, perhaps, we can apply them, somewhat homiletically, to Chinuch specifically. For the first approach, it is critical for teachers and parents to set up their Talmidim and children for success. So many seemingly extraneous factors can have a large impact on how they grow, and we must strive to give them every chance to flourish. The second approach reminds us to be cognizant of what stage our Talmidim and children are up to and what they are prepared to hear. Pushing things before they are ready can be quite damaging, and slow and steady growth is the healthiest approach. For the third approach, we must also keep in mind the attractions of a less Ruchani lifestyle and be vigilant that our Talmidim and children not be swayed. The last approach reminds us that there is always a balance between individual and communal needs, and both must be considered and taken into account. By applying all of these approaches over a lifetime of Chinuch, we will be Zocheh both as individuals and as a community to see our children flourish.

Torah Academy of Bergen County invites all high school students (including graduating eighth graders) to join our fourteenth annual Tanach Kollel. This year we will be learning Sefer Daniel from June 15 to June 17. For details and to register, please contact Rabbi Jachter at howard.jachter@tabc.org

DO AS THE AVOT DO

by Alex Kalb ('15)

In the beginning of Parashat BeChukotai, the Torah states, "*VeZacharti Et Beriti Ya'akov, VeAf Et Beriti Yitzchak, VeAf Et Beriti Avraham Ezkor, VeHaAretz Ezkor,*" "I will remember My covenant with Ya'akov, and also My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham will I remember, and I will remember the land" (VaYikra 26: 42), which we recite in the Akeidah portion of Tefillah every morning. The Gemara (Shabbat 55a) notes two opinions on why we value our Avot—Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov—and if they still benefit our nation. Shmuel says that the value of the Avot has already died out and no longer gives us protection. However, Rav Yochanan says that the merit of the Avot continues to benefit us with grace from Heaven. Tosafot comment that the aforementioned Pasuk proves that the Jews will have freedom due to Hashem remembering the promise He made with their forefathers. How can Shmuel say that the value of the Avot died out? Furthermore, if the merit of the Avot did in fact die out, then why do we still mention them every day during Tefillah?

Tosafot answer this by differentiating between the value of the Avot and the Berit with the Avot. The Berit, sworn by Hashem to the Avot, is never to be broken, and it is this Berit that we say in our Tefillah.

Alternatively, it can be that there really is no disagreement between Shmuel and Rav Yochanan. Rather, Shmuel is referring to the Berit's power to protect Am Yisrael from evil, while Rav Yochanan is referring to its power to protect the righteous. The Devar Avraham explains this opinion by saying that people are allowed to take pride in the greatness of their ancestors only if their behavior matches their pride. Those who do Aveirot and don't follow in the ways of their ancestors may not take pride in their greatness, for their actions degrade the source of their pride.

Rav Moshe Feinstein presents an additional answer as to how we can rely on the merit of the Avot, even according to Shmuel. In the eyes of Hashem, the Avot were very special people who passed on this covenant for many generations after them. The Torah states (Shemot 34:7), "*Notzeir Chesed LaAlafim Nosei Avon VaFesha VeChata'ah VeNakeih Lo Yenakeh Pokeid Avon Avot Al Banim VeAl Bnei Banim Al Shileishim VeAl Ribei'im,*" "Keeper of kindness even for the thousands of generation, forgiver of crime and sin, but will not necessarily clear the guilty peoples' names from the current children to their children and their children, all the way until their third and fourth generations." The Torah here promises to reward every righteous person for two thousand generations. We can benefit from this promise since we are still within that

number of generations from our righteous forefathers. While in order to have this merit one must also be righteous, even though not every individual is, the nation as a whole is still considered to be righteous. Therefore, we are still able to benefit from the merit of the Avot even according to Shmuel, because we can evoke the merit of our righteous forefathers as a nation.

However, we may then ask ourselves why we are fortunate enough to benefit from our righteous Avot? Also, why are we benefiting from Mitzvot that the Avot did many generations ago when we are so far removed from them by time?

Rav Dessler, in the beginning of his *Michtav MeiEliyahu*, explains this concept and the obligation that it places on us.

Imagine that two thieves are brought before a judge to be tried for their crimes. The judge, trying not to be cruel, would like to find a way to change them into good people without having them face harsh punishments. He therefore decides to find out whatever he can about each of the criminals. The judge finds out that the first thief comes from a respectable family and is usually surrounded by law abiding citizens. However, this one time, he was negatively influenced by a bad friend. The judge decides that instead of sending the man to jail, he will release him to his family, hoping that under their influence and guidance, he will not violate the law again. For this man, returning him to his family will have a better effect on him than having him sit in jail for an extended period. The judge then finds out that the second thief, on the other hand, has no good influences in his life. Upon return to his own society, he will most likely violate another law and appear once again before the judge, having not learned his lesson. In this case, the judge must send him to jail, so that he will not commit any further crimes, and he will at least learn from his actions in the way that best suits his needs.

In both of these cases, justice was served and the goal of changing the criminals' behavior was achieved. In terms of the first thief, this goal was able to be accomplished through *Middat HaRachamim*, the attribute of mercy, while the second thief had to feel the attribute of *Middat HaDin*, strict justice.

Our forefathers left us this rich spiritual legacy of just people. Rav Chaim of Volozhin writes that millions of simple Jews throughout the generations have given their lives to Torah to model after the great accomplishments of Avraham in giving his life to Hashem in Ur Kasdim. His greatness in spirituality has been a great influence for the entire nation in their nature and actions. This is true regarding the accomplishments of the other Avot as well. We have a naturally elevated spiritual character due to the efforts of our forefathers.

When we identify with this strong legacy, we allow the noble character traits that our forefathers established in our nation to flow through us. When we work on strengthening ourselves by sacrificing our worldly desires for Hashem, we connect with the Avot and show that we are able to repent from any sins that were the result from our human nature. Hashem can then decide whether it is worth giving us another chance or not. Benefiting

from the merit of our Avot means connecting to them by acting with the same religious zeal as they did.

YERUSHALAYIM, THE BEIT HAMIKDASH AND EZRA PEREK 4

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

This past June (2015-5775), more than twenty incoming TABC students, current TABC students and TABC alumni gathered, with Hashem's help, for the twelfth annual Tanach Kollel, where we devoted a week to learning Sefer Ezra. This coming June 15th, 16th and 17th, we again, God willing, will devote another exciting week to the study of Tanach. We will be learning Sefer Daniel, one of the most fascinating Sefarim in the entire Tanach.

One of the issues the 5774 Tanach Kollel grappled with was the mystifying Perek 4 of Sefer Ezra. It is a pleasure to present the Tanach Kollel's collective explanation of this challenging Perek, especially in honor of this coming Sunday's celebration of Yom Yerushalayim.

The Content of Ezra Perek 4

Sefer Ezra begins with great excitement as the Persian emperor Koresh (Cyrus) grants us (in the year 539 BCE¹) permission to return to Eretz Yisrael and to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash. Perek 4 of Sefer Ezra, however, opens with tension recording that our enemies² offer to help us in our efforts to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash, but our leaders (including Yehoshua Kohein Gadol and the governor Zerubavel) refuse their assistance. The refusal seems to stem from the fact that the Jewish status of these Samaritans is highly questionable, and consenting to their cooperation would wrongly confer legitimacy to their claims of Jewish identity.

Infuriated by our refusal to recognize the Samaritans as Jews, the Samaritans tenaciously resisted our attempts to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash and even hired representatives to successfully convince Koresh to retract his permission to rebuild the Mikdash.

¹ This year is in accord with the common chronology which is supported by both Persian and Greek historical records as well a straightforward reading of Ezra Perek 4, which lists the order of the kings as Cyrus, Darius, Achashveirosh (the Jewish version of the Persian name Chashirash – see Esther 10:1, which presents Achashirash as a “Ketiv” alternative to Achashveirosh, seemingly clinching the identification of Xerxes with Achashveirosh) and Artachshasta. This order of Persian kings conforms to the common chronology of Persian kings but differs from the mainstream view of Chazal (see, for example, Rashi to Ezra 4:6), that the order is Koresh, Achashveirosh and then Daryavesh. The strictly Orthodox commentary Da'at Mikra presents a Peshat (basic and straightforward) explanation of Sefer Ezra-Nechemiah conforming to the common chronology. Malbim (Ezra 7:1) presents Radak and the Ba'al HaMa'or, who regard alternatives to Chazal's chronology. Malbim regards this as a legitimate and viable alternative.

² These enemies appear to be the Shomeranim (Samaritans), as they mention that they were brought to Eretz Yisrael by an Assyrian king. See Melachim II 17:24-41 for the story of their forced transfer to Eretz Yisrael by the Assyrians and their subsequent highly questionable conversion to Judaism. A tiny community of

Perek 4 of Sefer Ezra continues and notes that Samaritan resistance to our rebuilding project continues from Koresh until³ the reign of Daryavesh (Darius, who reigned from 522-486 BCE according to the common chronology). Our Samaritan adversaries persist in the days of Achashveirosh (485-465 BCE, according to the common chronology) and write an accusation against us. Perek 4 continues and describes that during the reign of Artachshasta (Artaxerxes, king of Persia, 464-424 BCE), the Samaritans write a letter saying that if Jerusalem is rebuilt, Persian control of it will cease. Pasuk 23 records that Artaxerxes forces the rebuilding of Yerushalayim to cease. The letter of complaint and Artachshasta's response is presented at great length from Pesukim 8 to 22. Pasuk 24 then shockingly records that the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash ceases until the second year of Darius' reign.

Profound Problems with Ezra Perek 4

The inclusion in Perek 4 of the letter to Artachshasta regarding our rebuilding the walls of Yerushalayim is utterly shocking. Sefer Nechemiah is devoted to a full description of the struggle to rebuild the walls of Yerushalayim in the year 445 BCE (according to the common chronology). By contrast, Ezra, Perakim 1-6, describes the struggle to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash. The Artachshasta correspondence appears entirely irrelevant to this section of Sefer Ezra. Moreover, Perek 4 seamlessly transitions from describing in Pasuk 23 the interruption of the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash to recording the disruption of the building of the Beit HaMikdash in Pasuk 24. Why does Sefer Ezra in Perek 4 interpolate the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls within a discussion of the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash?⁴

Samaritans survive and live near Har Gerizim, which they regard as holy (as recorded in Chullin 6a). A video entitled “Are Samaritans a Disappearing People?” (available on You Tube) describes their current situation.

³ Tanach Kollel members/Torah Academy of Bergen County students Hillel Koslowe and Gavriel Kruman note that the fact that our Perek describes the time as from Koresh until Daryavesh (and not simply in the days of Koresh and Daryavesh) indicates that there was at least one other ruler between Koresh and Daryavesh. This, Hillel and Gavriel note, seems to refer to Cambyses, who served as emperor, according to Greek and Persian sources, between Koresh and Daryavesh. Rashi to Daniel 11:2 also makes mention of Cambyses.

⁴ Rashi (Ezra 4:7) solves this problem by identifying (based on Rosh Hashanah 3b) the Artachshasta of Perek 4 with either Koresh or Daryavesh (Rashi explains that Artachshasta is the title given to all Persian kings, as Par'oh is the title given to every Egyptian ruler). Rashi, however, does not explain why a discussion of the building of Jerusalem's walls is inserted in a discussion of the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash.



The Equation of Yerushalayim with the Beit HaMikdash

A solution to this enormous problem emerges from Rambam's linking the holiness of Yerushalayim with the Kedushah of the Beit HaMikdash (Hilchot Beit HaBechirah 6:16). Rambam famously argues that even though the Kedushah Rishonah – the special holiness bestowed upon Eretz Yisrael which took effect when Yehoshua conquered Eretz Yisrael – elapsed with Nevuchadnetzar's conquest of Eretz Yisrael, the Kedushah of the Beit HaMikdash remains intact. Rambam explains that while the Kedushah conferred by Yehoshua's conquest may be reversed, the Kedushah of the Beit HaMikdash is irreversible, since its holiness is a result of Hashem's eternal presence. Rambam classifies Yerushalayim and the Beit HaMikdash in the same category and argues that, unlike the rest of Eretz Yisrael, Jerusalem's and the Beit HaMikdash's holiness was not canceled by the Babylonian conquest. The holiness of Jerusalem is a result of God's eternal presence, identical to the holiness of the Beit HaMikdash.

Similarly, when the Mishnah (Rosh HaShanah 4:1) writes that Shofar is blown on Shabbat in the Mikdash – but not in the rest of Eretz Yisrael – Rambam (Hilchot Shofar 2:8) writes that Shofar is blown not only in the Beit HaMikdash but also in all of Yerushalayim on Shabbat. Once again, when the Mishnah (Sukkah 3:12) records that on a Torah level one is obligated to take the Four Minim only in the Beit HaMikdash during the last six days of Sukkot, Rambam (Peirush HaMishanayot Sukkah) includes the entire city of Yerushalayim in this obligation⁵.

We should note that Rav Soloveitchik invoked this point when many Jews asked in the aftermath of the Six Day War and the subsequent building of much of Yerushalayim whether they should continue reciting the "Nacheim" prayer – which describes Yerushalayim among other things as "desolate without inhabitants" – on Tishah BeAv, since the prayer seems to be entirely inappropriate in a time when hundreds of thousands of Jews live and thrive in Jerusalem.

Rav Chaim David HaLeivy (Teshuvot Aseih Lecha Rav 1:14) calls for adding one word to "Nacheim," namely "SheHayeta," which clarifies that the city that *was* desolate without inhabitants, but it still mourns during times of prosperity due to the continued absence of the Beit HaMikdash. However, most Rabbanim, including Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (cited in Nefesh HaRav pp.78-79), opposed changing the text of "Nacheim." Rav Soloveitchik argues that referring to Yerushalayim as desolate refers to Jerusalem in its status as an extension of the Beit HaMikdash, a status from which Jerusalem derives its special Halachic standing. As long as the Beit HaMikdash is not rebuilt, we view Yerushalayim as desolate and degraded.

Explaining Ezra Perek 4

By anachronistically inserting the correspondence regarding our rebuilding the walls of Yerushalayim within the discussion of our rebuilding the Beit HaMikdash, Sefer Ezra equates the

rebuilding of Jerusalem with the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash. In fact, the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash was incomplete until the walls of Yerushalayim were complete.

The reasoning for this equation is straightforward. Yesayahu (Perek 1 is a prime example) and many other Nevi'im condemn as repulsive those who offer generous Korbanot in the Beit HaMikdash and behave unethically outside its precincts. The Kedushah of the Beit HaMikdash must overflow into everyday life and not remain confined within its walls. For this reason, Hashem includes many ethical commands in the second half of Sefer VaYikra, the Sefer designated as Torat Kohanim, devoted to the laws of the Beit HaMikdash and Korbanot. The holiness of the Mishkan described in the first half of Sefer VaYikra must be extended and applied to our mundane activities discussed in the second half of Sefer VaYikra. The ethical conduct of everyday life in Jerusalem in close proximity to the Beit HaMikdash serves as a paradigmatic example of how the Kedushah of the Temple must extend beyond its four walls, as taught by Sefer VaYikra.

Conclusion

Chazal (Bava Batra 14b) view Ezra and Nechemiah as one Sefer even though the portion called "Ezra" focuses on the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash and that which is called "Nechemiah" focuses on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. By synthesizing these two projects, even though they took place nearly seventy years apart from each other (according to the common chronology), Sefer Ezra teaches that the holiness of Yerushalayim stems from its being constituted as an extension of the Beit HaMikdash. The mysterious Ezra Perek 4 is not a mystery at all. Ezra Perek 4 powerfully conveys the message that in order for the holiness of the Beit HaMikdash to be expressed authentically, it must be extended and applied to ordinary life in Jerusalem's markets, homes and interpersonal connections.

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Questions, comments? Contact us at:

Kol Torah

c/o Torah Academy of Bergen County

1600 Queen Anne Road

Teaneck, NJ 07666

Phone: (201) 837-7696

koltorah@koltorah.org

To subscribe to Kol Torah via email, message webmaster@koltorah.org

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⁵ Rav Yitzchak Yosef, in Yalkut Yosef (Orach Chaim 658:1), writes that some have the custom to bring their Lulav to the Kotel on each of the last six

days of Sukkot to fulfill this Mitzvah on a Torah level in accordance with Rambam's view.