

PARASHAT KI TAVO

"And God Shall Return You to Egypt in Boats"

By Rav Mordechai Sabato

A.

The central section of parashat Ki Tavo is the blessings and curses of chapter 28. This section concludes the unit begun in parashat Re'eh, where Moshe already mentions the blessing and the curse: "Behold, I place before you today a blessing and a curse." In our parasha, the blessings and the curses are given in detail.

In this shiur I would like to focus on a single verse - the conclusion of the list of curses:

And God shall return you to Egypt in boats
on the way that I told you that you shall never see again
and you shall be sold there to your enemies
but there will be no purchaser. (28:68)

This verse is clearly not a natural continuation of the verses that precede it. The previous section describes the dispersal of the Jews among all the nations and the dangerous fate that will befall them there:

And God will scatter you among all the peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known, wood and stone. And among these nations you shall find no ease, neither shall the sole of your foot have rest; but the Lord shall give you there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and despair of heart; and your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of your life: in the morning you shall say, "Would that it were evening!" and in the evening you shall say, "Would that it were morning!" for the fear of your heart with which you shall fear, and for the sight of your eyes which you shall see.
(28:64-67)

Our verse, on the other hand, speaks only of exile in Egypt, and this is a different punishment than that described in the previous section. It is clear that verse 68 begins a new punishment from the style in which it opens - "And God will return you" - which parallels the opening style of the previous section - "and God will scatter you."

Furthermore, the commentaries have noticed that chapter 30 continues chapter 28. Chapter 30 begins: "And when all of these things shall befall you, the blessing and the curse which I have placed before you, ... among all the nations into which the Lord your God has driven you." This verse relates to the state of the Jews after the curse described in chapter 28 befalls them, and describes the Jews as dispersed amidst all the nations, exactly as was detailed in verses 64-67 of chapter 28. This is repeated two verses later: "The Lord your God shall return your captivity and have mercy on you, and will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the Lord your God has scattered you" (30:3). This is exactly the language of chapter 28:64. We see that chapter 30 returns to chapter 28:64-67 and ignores the situation described in verse 68. This again emphasizes the anomaly of this verse.

The singularity of this verse can be demonstrated by comparing the verses at the end of chapter 28 with the threat of exile of chapter 4.

Devarim chapter 4

(26) I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that soon you shall be DESTROYED from off the land into which you go over the Yarden to POSSESS it; you shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be ANNIHILATED.

(27-8) And God shall SCATTER YOU AMONG THE PEOPLES, and you shall be left few in number among the nations where God shall lead you. And there YOU SHALL SERVE GODS, the work of men's hands, WOOD AND STONE...

no parallel

Devarim chapter 28

(63) And it shall come to pass that as God rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you, so God will rejoice over you to DESTROY you, and to ANNIHILATE you; and you shall be plucked from off the land into which you go to POSSESS it.

(64) And God will SCATTER YOU AMONG ALL THE PEOPLES, from one end of the earth to the other; and there YOU SHALL SERVE OTHER GODS, which neither you nor your fathers have known, WOOD AND STONE.

(68) And God shall return you to Egypt in boats on the way that I told you that you shall never see again, and you shall be sold there to your enemies

but there will be no purchaser.

The similarity of these two sections is not coincidental. Chapter 4 concludes the first speech of Moshe in Sefer Devarim. Chapter 28 concludes the second speech. Both speeches close with the

basic principle that the inheritance of the land is not guaranteed unconditionally. Sin will lead to exile even though the people have been living in the land for many years.

The similarity of the two chapters is expressed in an additional point. After the threat of exile in chapter 4, the Torah adds the promise of repentance and redemption (verses 29-30). This element appears absent from the rebuke in Devarim 28, which concludes with the threat of exile to Egypt. However, this observation is not accurate. As we mentioned, the natural continuation of chapter 28 is chapter 30, which revolves around the promise of repentance and redemption. Here, too, the similarity of chapter 4 to chapter 30 is apparent.

Chapter 4

(29-30) And you shall seek there the Lord your God and you shall find - if you search with ALL YOUR HEART AND ALL YOUR SOUL. When you are in distress and ALL THESE THINGS come upon you, in the latter days, YOU SHALL RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD AND HEARKEN TO HIS VOICE.

Chapter 30

(1-2) And when ALL THESE THINGS shall befall you... YOU SHALL RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD AND HEARKEN TO HIS VOICE ... you and your children, WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND ALL YOUR SOUL.

Against the background of the similarity between chapter 4 and chapters 28 & 30, the anomaly of verse 68 which concludes chapter 28 is all the more apparent - for it is completely absent from chapter 4. Similarly, in the chapter of rebuke in Sefer Vayikra (parashat Bechukkotai), the threat of exile is mentioned: "And I shall disperse you among the nations" (Vayikra 26:33), but there is no parallel to verse 68 of our chapter, which warns of exile to Egypt.

In conclusion, this element of exile described in verse 68 is unparalleled and unconnected to what precedes it and what follows it. What then does the Torah wish to tell us by concluding chapter 28 specifically with the threat of exile to Egypt?

B.

In order to answer this question, we must examine closely the language of the verse and notice the points which distinguish this threat from the description of exile in the previous section. I would like to make four points.

1. In the previous section, the threat is of dispersal among all the nations, and the Torah accordingly uses the language "I shall scatter you" (ve-hefitzekha). In verse 68, the threat is of the RETURN to Egypt of the entire people as a unit, and therefore the Torah uses the language "I shall return you" (ve-heshivkha).

2. In the previous section, the Torah describes the danger and the fear which will afflict the Jews among the nations: "And among these nations you shall find no ease ... the Lord shall give you there a trembling heart." In verse 68, the Torah emphasizes specifically the sale into slavery.

3. In the previous section, the Torah did not describe how God would disperse the Jews among the nations. In verse 68, the Torah mentions that they will return to Egypt "in boats" - a detail that would seem to be insignificant.

4. In verse 68, the Torah added that the return would be "on the way that I told you shall not see again."

Taken together, these four points teach us that the threat of return to Egypt is not a threat merely of exile. The threat here expresses, as it were, the cancellation of the election of the Jewish people. The Jews belong to God by virtue of the exodus from Egypt, "for the children of Israel are My servants, My servants are they, for I have taken them out of the land of Egypt." God's returning the Jews to Egypt cancels, it would seem, their being taken out of it by Him. Therefore the Torah emphasizes in this verse the aspect of slavery: "and you shall be sold there to your enemies for slaves." Slavery in Egypt totally contradicts service of God. The return to Egypt represents the return to the state of the Jews before they were redeemed by God from the house of bondage, whereby He acquired them as His people. That is why the Torah uses the language "and God will return you" - which is in contradistinction to the language of being taken out from there.

This point is emphasized if we examine the conclusion of the curses: "These are the words of the covenant which God commanded Moshe to enact with the Jews in the land of Moav, aside from the covenant which He enacted with them in Chorev" (verse 69). The covenant in the land of Moav completes the covenant of Chorev, Sinai. The covenant in Chorev begins with the words, "I am the Lord your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Shemot 20:2, Devarim 5:6). The covenant of Moav ends with the words, "and God will return you to Egypt in boats... and you shall be sold there to your enemies as slaves." The two verses parallel each other. The covenant is based on the exodus of the people from Egypt, the house of bondage, via God's salvation. Non-compliance with the conditions of the covenant will lead to their being returned by God to slavery in Egypt.

Reading our verse against the background of the exodus from Egypt can explain the purpose of the word "in boats" in our verse. In the limited context of the verse, the word refers to boats which carry slaves. However, viewing it in the wider context of the verse as we explained, this word should be seen as a contrast to the splitting of the sea. The exodus from Egypt took place against the background of the great miracle of the splitting of the sea, which allowed the Jews to flee Egypt by crossing the sea on dry land. Our verse emphasizes that their return to Egypt will not be accompanied by another miracle of the splitting of the sea, but rather will be accomplished by boats, which are in fact boats of slavery. While the exodus was accomplished by the exalted state of walking on dry land through the sea with the waters as a wall on their right

and on their left, their return to Egypt will be on boats - and this contrast expresses the distinction between redemption and bondage.

This explanation also clarifies the Torah's emphasis that the return to Egypt will be "on the way that I told you that you shall never see again." This refers to the route by which the Jews left Egypt, about which they had been promised that they will not see it again. Our verse teaches that this promise as well was conditional. Non-compliance with the conditions of the covenant would cancel this promise. God, who took them out of Egypt, will send them back to Egypt on the very same path by which they had left, and this in order to emphasize the significance of this return.

C.

In the previous section, we explained that the expression "the way that I told you that you shall never see again" refers to a promise that was given to the Jews when they left Egypt. However, in the Mekhilta this verse is explained not as a promise but as a prohibition.

In three places, the Torah commands Israel not to return to Egypt, as is written, "For as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see them again for eternity" (Shemot 14:13). And it is written, "And God said to you, Do not return upon this way again" (Devarim 17:16). And it is written, "And God shall return you to Egypt by boat on the way that I said to you that you shall never see again" (Devarim 28:68).

The Sages apparently saw these three verses as expressing a prohibition of returning to Egypt. Leaving aside for the moment the verse in our parasha, let us look at the two others.

"Moshe said to the people: Fear not; stand and witness salvation of God which He shall do for you today, for as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see them again for eternity" (Shemot 14:13). In the context of the story of the exodus of Egypt, there can be no question that the literal meaning of the verse is a promise and not a prohibition.

On the other hand, the verse in Devarim 17:16 appears clearly to express a prohibition: "But he [i.e. the king] shall not accumulate horses, nor return the people to Egypt, in order to accumulate horses, for God has said to you, 'Do not return upon this way again.'" The verse appears to claim that this prohibition had been given to the Jews previously. Where was this prohibition given?

The sages in the Mekhilta (Massekhta De-pischa 12) asked this question: "Where was it said? 'For as you have seen Egypt today...'" This midrash agrees with the previous Mekhilta in viewing the verse in Shemot as a prohibition. As we have already pointed out, this is not in accordance with the simple explanation of the verse. Ibn Ezra and Ramban (both on Devarim 17:16) agree that the verse in Devarim is not referring back to the verse in Shemot. What, then, is the source of the previously-promulgated prohibition referred to in Devarim 17:16?

Let us set this question aside for the moment and return to the third verse, that in our parasha. We have already mentioned that in context this verse hints at a promise that the Jews will not return to Egypt. However, if we examine carefully the language of this verse, we will see that it is based on elements taken from the two previous verses. The general style of the verse is based on Devarim 17:16, where it states, "And God has said to you, Do not return upon this way again." In both verses, the subject is the way, the path that leads to Egypt. However, in Shemot 14:13 the subject is not seeing the Egyptians themselves. Nonetheless, the verb "to see" found in our verse is taken from the verse in Sefer Shemot. We see that the Torah itself has combined the two elements of the return to Egypt, the prohibition and the promise. We now need to understand what is the significance of this combination of two different elements. Why does Devarim 28:68, a verse whose content is clearly a promise, contain language drawn from Devarim 17:16, whose subject is a prohibition?

D.

In order to understand this, we have to first understand the reason for the prohibition to return to Egypt. The Rambam (Sefer Ha-mitzvot, prohibition #46) writes, "We were forbidden to dwell in the land of Egypt forever, so that we shall not learn from their heresy and not follow their evil actions." The Ramban (Devarim 17:16) writes likewise:

The reason for this commandment is that the Egyptians and the Canaanites were very evil and sinners before God, as is written, "Like the actions of the land of Egypt, where you have dwelled, you shall not do, and like the actions of the land of Canaan..." (Vayikra 18:3). God wishes that Israel should not learn from their actions and He destroyed the Canaanites and commanded that they shall not live in our land, and concerning the Egyptians He commanded that we should not return to their land.

This explanation presents two difficulties. Firstly, not only the Egyptians and the Canaanites were very evil and sinners before God. The reason the Torah mentions specifically these two nations was only because they were the nations with which Israel was familiar in the past or about to come to know. Secondly, the verse does not prohibit dwelling in Egypt, but the return to Egypt: "And God has said to you: Do not return upon this way again."

It would seem that the reason for the prohibition is similar to the reason for the promise. Just as God has promised the Jews that they will not return to Egypt on this way as an expression of the eternal nature of the election of Israel and its becoming the nation of God, so too God prohibited the people to return to Egypt by the same road in order that they not express a rebellion against God and a return to the patronage of Egypt.

The relationship between God and His people is mutual. God grants His patronage to the people, and the people accept upon themselves God's patronage. God promises not to remove His patronage from His people and not to return them to slavery in Egypt, and the people commit themselves not to remove themselves from the patronage of God and not to return themselves

to the patronage of Egypt. The non-return to Egypt by the same path expresses these two aspects - both the promise of God and the prohibition that applies to the people. Both of them have a common source.

This, it seems, is what the Torah wishes to teach in our verse. In the context of chapter 28, it expresses a promise (more exactly, the cancellation of a promise). But its language is combined from the verses of the previous sections in Devarim and in Shemot, one of which is a prohibition and one of which is a promise. The Torah wishes to express that God's promise not to return the people on this way to Egypt is the flip side of the people's prohibition not to return by this path to Egypt.

We can now return to the verse in Devarim 17, which seemed to refer back to a previous prohibition which we could not find. Indeed, the verse in Devarim 17 is referring to the verse in Shemot 14, although the verse in Devarim is a prohibition and the verse in Shemot is a promise. This is not a problem, for both the prohibition and the promise are two sides of the same coin.

Hence, the verse in Devarim 17 not only refers to the verse in Shemot 14, but also explains and clarifies it by deepening its meaning. In Devarim 28, the verse already encompasses this new complex meaning, based on the combination of the two aspects of the return to Egypt into one idea.

E.

One question remains. If, indeed, the return to Egypt and the sale there into slavery signify the cancellation of the election of Israel and the return to the state before the exodus, then this verse contradicts the promise of the eternity of the selection of Israel and the immutability of God's kingship over the Jews. This promise is found in many places in the Torah and is a basic principle in the faith of Israel.

The answer to this question is found in the last words of our verse, which I have ignored until now: "And you shall be sold there to your enemies as slaves BUT THERE WILL BE NO PURCHASER." In the restricted context of this verse, these words serve to deepen the severity of the punishment. The status of the Jews will be so bad that even when they wish to be sold in order to find sustenance, no purchaser will be found. However, within the wider context of the verse, a deeper understanding arises. The verse hints at a promise. Once God has acquired the people through the exodus from Egypt, no other purchaser will be found, even if the people wish to be sold. The depths of the punishment contain the depths of the consolation. Although our chapter ends with punishment, it contains within itself the hint to a great consolation.

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