

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

This parasha series is dedicated le-zekher nishmat
Ha-Rabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.

PARASHAT NITZAVIM

Israel's Return and God's Return

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In the outset of his commentary to our parasha, Rashi cites a passage from the Midrash:

"Why was Parashat Nitzavim juxtaposed to the curses [of Parashat Ki-Tavo]? When Benei Yisrael heard [these] ninety-eight curses, beyond the forty-nine listed in Torat Kohanim [i.e. Vayikra chapter 26], their faces turned green and they said, 'Who can withstand all these?!' Moshe therefore proceeded to comfort them: 'You stand here today - despite your having angered the Almighty, He has not destroyed you and you still stand before Him today. Just as the day itself exists, becoming darker and then brighter, so has God served as a source of light for you in the past, and so will He in the future.'" (Rashi 29:11)

These comments accurately reflect the reader's experience upon studying these parshiyot. On the one hand, the entrance into an eternal treaty with God engenders fervor and excitement, as Am Yisrael commit themselves to God's service and He, in turn, promises to establish them as His special nation. On the other hand, this covenant carries with it ominous curses that greatly outnumber the relatively small number of blessings found in Parashat Ki-Tavo. The festive atmosphere of the covenant has been tainted by the series of unspeakable horrors specified in last week's parasha. Following the Midrash, Rashi seeks to offer encouragement to the reader.

Additionally, a certain assumption seems to have prompted the Midrash's opening question: "Why was Parashat Nitzavim juxtaposed to the curses?" The Midrash sees no immediate connection between the two parshiyot and must therefore present a homiletic interpretation. However, while on the level of "derash" we need to seek reasons for the juxtaposition of the two parshiyot, on the level of "peshat" it seems clear that this week's parasha is a direct continuation of the covenant established last week's parasha.

In the aftermath of the covenant of Parashat Ki-Tavo, Moshe stands before the people in Parashat Nitzavim and urges them to uphold the agreement they have just made. He not only encourages them and soothes their fear generated by last week's searing "tokhecha," but he also warns them that they may not retract the covenant:

"Perchance there is among you some man or woman, or some clan or tribe, whose heart even now turns away from the Lord our God... God will never forgive him; rather will

God's anger and passion rage against that man, till every curse recorded in this book comes down upon him, and God blots out his name from under heaven." (29:17-19)

But Moshe's concluding remarks regarding the covenant involve more than just encouragement and admonishment. Upon hearing the covenant, one may infer that Am Yisrael could potentially be driven into permanent exile, with no possibility of return. A superficial reading of the terms of the covenant implies that Benei Yisrael's failure to uphold their agreement results in total destruction: "...so will God now delight in causing you to perish and in wiping you out" (28:63). Parashat Nitzavim informs us of the option of teshuva, repentance. Exile does not mean the end. The nation can return to God, and He will compassionately return them to their land.

This concept of teshuva was omitted from the blessings and curses of Parashat Ki-Tavo, that is, from the contents of the covenant. Moshe introduces it only later, in his comments in the aftermath of the covenant.

Why is this so? Why does God, in the covenant, seem not to leave open the option of teshuva? And if indeed He doesn't, then how can Moshe introduce this option of his own accord?

It would seem that the unique quality of repentance is manifest by its placement within these parshiyot. Teshuva cannot be included within the actual covenant, because the strictly legal aspect of the covenant, the mutual obligation binding both parties, leaves no room for such flexibility. Once Benei Yisrael breach their agreement, then the covenant automatically dissolves in its totality. In a certain sense, this is precisely the defining feature of a mutually binding contract – total and eternally irrevocable commitment on the part of each party towards the other. God therefore omits any mention of teshuva in the actual contract itself. But after the agreement, as Moshe urges the people to uphold the covenant and warns against its infraction, there is room to speak of terms and conditions extending outside the strict bounds of the legal, bilateral contract. Although it deviates from legal norms, the option of teshuva forever remains open for Benei Yisrael.

Given the centrality of the concept of teshuva in Parashat Nitzavim, it is worthwhile to carefully examine the relevant verses, which, as the following table demonstrates, form a chiastic structure:

A. YISRAEL'S REPENTANCE:

"When all these things befall you – the blessing and the curse that I have set before you – and you will return to your heart amidst the various nations to which the Lord your God has banished you, and you return to the Lord your God, and you and your children heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you today"...

B. GOD'S RETURN TO COMPASSION FOR HIS PEOPLE:

"Then the Lord your God will return your fortunes and take you back in love. He will return to bring you together from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will fetch you. And the Lord your God will bring you

to the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your fathers. Then the Lord your God will open up your heart and the hearts of your offspring to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live”.

C. GOD'S PROTECTION OF YISRAEL:

“The Lord your God will inflict all those curses upon the enemies and foes who persecuted you”.

D. YISRAEL'S REPENTANCE:

“You, however, will return to heed God and obey all His commandments that I enjoin upon you this day”.

C1. GOD'S BLESSING TO YISRAEL:

“And the Lord your God will grant you abounding prosperity in all your undertakings, in the issue of your womb, the offspring of your cattle, and the produce of your soil”.

B1. GOD'S RETURN TO DELIGHT IN HIS PEOPLE:

“For God will return to delight in your well-being, as He did in that of your fathers”,

A1. YISRAEL'S REPENTANCE:

“Since you will be heeding the Lord your God and keeping His commandments and laws that are recorded in this Torah – once you return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul”.

The Hebrew root "Sh.U.V.," which connotes return, repentance and restoration, appears no fewer than seven times in this rather small unit, and clearly marks the focal point of this discussion .

As the table clearly indicates, Yisrael's repentance constitutes the central topic of the unit and forms the framework of this section. This concept emerges at either end of the unit as well as the center (A, D, A1). The rest of this section revolves around the repentance of the Jewish people, and depicts the results of this phenomenon, specifically the reaction of the Almighty Himself. All the verbs in the rest of the unit modify God; they describe His response to the people's process of teshuva. Thus, Am Yisrael are the ones whose actions appear at the beginning, end and center of the unit, whereas God's action, which is but a response to the people's conduct, emerges in the rest of the section.

The first result of the nation's return to God (B-B1) is God's "return" to His people: "...then the Lord your God will RETURN your fortunes and take you back in love. He will RETURN to bring you together from all the peoples..." The Torah specifically employs the expression "ve-shav," denoting returning, thus emphasizing that God immediately returns to the people when they return to Him. This mutual "return" relates as well to God's love for Benei Yisrael - "then the Lord your God will return your fortunes and take you back in love" – and to His desire to ensure their welfare - "For God will

return to delight in your well-being." Thus, the first result of the nation's repentance is their physical return to their land and the restoration of the emotional bond between the nation and God.

The next result involves divine providence over Benei Yisrael upon their return to the land. This supervision yields protection from potential foes and retribution to past oppressors (C), as well as prosperity and fertility (C1). God promises to not only restore Benei Yisrael's sovereignty in their land, but also to ensure their security and economic welfare.

The chiasmic style of this section underscores the bilateral quality of the process of return. When Am Yisrael returns to God, then He returns to them, brings them back to their land, and restores His love and blessing. This structure suggests that we are dealing, once again, with a covenant of sorts. Although, as we noted earlier, the very concept of teshuva has no place in a mutual, legally-binding contract, nevertheless, a mutual agreement exists even here, in Parashat Nitzavim, the parasha of teshuva.

The relationship depicted in these verses is one of genuine, mutual love. First we read of the feelings of Benei Yisrael: "...to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul" (30:6). After the people's return and the "return" of God, a new spirit will be implanted within the souls of Benei Yisrael, and from then on, their entire lives will be infused with an deep-rooted sense of love for God. The love described here is all-encompassing: "with all your heart and soul." This phrase is repeated three times in this short segment (30:2, 30:6, 30:10), thus generating an environment marked by the nation's absolute, all-encompassing devotion to God.

Corresponding to Benei Yisrael's absolute love, God's feelings, as it were, towards His people are also expressed in these verses:

..."then the Lord your God will return your fortunes and take you back in love... Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you, from there He will fetch you... For God will return to delight in your well-being, as He did in that of your fathers ".

Just as the nation will love the Almighty, so will He love them; if Am Yisrael repents with all its heart and soul, then God will turn away from His anger and restore the people to their land.

Thus, parallel to the legal, contractual agreement ironed out between God and His nation in Parashat Ki-Tavo, there exists a more intimate relationship that extends beyond the strict letter of the law. This second agreement allows for the institution of teshuva, for compassion and love between the Almighty and His people. During the coming Yamim Nora'im, may we - both as individuals and as a nation - restore this sense of mutual love, until we reach the level of "I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine".

(Translated by David Silverberg)