

The Covenant of Moav

By Rav Yair Kahn

I. Chorev and Moav

The section of *berakhot* and *kelalot*— the list of blessings Yisrael will receive if they abide by the Torah and the curses they will receive if they do not, found in chapter 28 — concludes with the *pasuk*, “These are the terms of the covenant that Hashem commanded to Moshe to make with *Bnei Yisrael* in the land of Moav, aside from the covenant which he made with them at Chorev” (28:69). This *pasuk* connects the covenant of Chorev (Sinai), documented in *Parashat Bechukotai* ([Vayikra 26](#)), with the parallel section found in our *parasha*. Our study of the covenant of Moav will therefore begin with a brief review of the Sinai covenant.

In our study of *Parashat Bechukotai*, we demonstrated that the list of calamities recorded follows a clear progression. The Torah begins with disasters that are not life threatening and continues with worse disasters that cause a loss of life. Later, the Torah describes an invasion of hostile forces, which not only brings death, but also compromises Yisrael's sovereignty. The Torah ends with the destruction of the *Mikdash* and exile from the Land of Israel.

In contrast, there seems to be no progression in *Parashat Ki Tavo*. In fact, there seems to be no order at all. Consider *pasuk* 36, where, after warning of various calamities, Moshe mentions exile:

Hashem will send you and your king that you have placed over you to a nation that you and your ancestors have not known and there you shall worship other gods of wood and stone.

Following the pattern of *Bechukotai*, the section should end here; in *Parashat Ki Tavo* the list of calamities continues, and they have nothing to do with difficulties Yisrael will face in exile. The subsequent *pesukim* deal with agricultural disasters that will occur in *Eretz Yisrael*, apparently before the exile:

You shall take much seed out into the field, but shall gather little; for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and tend to them, but you shall neither drink of the wine, nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them. You will have olive trees throughout your borders, however you shall not anoint yourselves with oil, for the olives shall fall off. (28:38-40).

Did Moshe merely record a random list of calamities, lacking rhyme and reason?

Moreover, the section is repetitive. We have already noted the mention of exile in *pasuk* 36. Consider the following *pasuk* that appears at the end of the section:

And Hashem shall scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which you and your ancestors have not known. (28:64)

Similarly, Moshe mentions that a foreign nation will eat the produce of the land in *pasuk* 33:

The fruit of your land and all your labors shall be eaten by a nation which you do not know and you shall be only oppressed and crushed all the days.

This same exact idea is repeated later in the section:

A nation of fierce countenance that shall not regard the elderly, nor show favor to the young. He shall eat the fruit of your cattle, and the fruit of your land, until you are destroyed. (28:50-51)

Instead of the structured development found in the *Bechukotai* section, the section in *Parashat Ki Tavo* seems to be characterized by repetition and confusion.

II. The *Berakha* Section

Before trying to make organizational sense out of the *kelala* section, let us take a closer look at the *berakha* section. The section begins as follows:

If you shall hearken diligently to the voice of Hashem your God, to observe to do all His commandments which I command you this day, then Hashem your God will set you on high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, **because you shall hearken unto the voice of Hashem your God**. (28:1-2)

Several commentators were troubled by the redundancy of the opening and closing phrase, “if you shall hearken to the voice of Hashem your God.” Since the blessings are predicated on the condition that Yisrael hearken to Hashem's voice, why is it necessary to repeat that these blessings will come because Yisrael hearkens to the voice of Hashem? Various suggestions were raised to explain what the closing phrase adds that was not included in the opening line. (See Nechama Leibowitz's essays for a discussion of the topic.)

Perhaps, however, the repetition did not come to add anything that was not included in the original statement, but rather as a refrain to indicate an inner division within the *berakha* section. This assertion is based on the fact that almost the identical phrase appears twice more in this section. Moshe tells Yisrael that Hashem will make them a holy people "because you will keep the commandments of Hashem your God, and walk in His ways" (28:9). At the end of the section, Moshe tells Yisrael that they will be placed above and not beneath "because you will hearken to the commandments of Hashem your God, which I command you this day, to observe and to do them" (28:13).

Based on this suggestion, we might divide the *berakhot* section into three segments. The first segment, from the beginning of the chapter until *pasuk* eight, is prefaced by the general blessing that Hashem will set us *elyon* (high) above all other nations. After a list of generic *berakhot* dealing with prosperity and well-being (28:3-6), Moshe mentions victory over foreign enemies (28:7). Perhaps, then, the *berakha* of "*elyon*" refers to political supremacy. The Ibn Ezra also interprets "*elyon*" as a general *berakha*, but he explains it as referring to the singularity and uniqueness of Yisrael.

The second segment, *pesukim* 9-11, begins: "Hashem will establish you for a holy people unto Himself ... And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of Hashem is called upon you; and they shall be afraid of you." This subsection deals with the sanctity of Yisrael, which is distinct from the idea of political superiority. In fact, the distinction of these two concepts is stated explicitly: "To make you high (*elyon*) above all nations that He has made ... and that you may be a holy people unto Hashem your God, as He has spoken" (26:19). Sanctity is rooted in the fact that Yisrael is Hashem's nation. Therefore, this section not only stresses observance of *mitzvot*, but also emulating the divine traits, as it were: "And you shall walk in His ways" (28:9, see Rambam, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, *mitzva* 8).

The third segment, *pesukim* 12-14, deals with economic independence and eminence: "Hashem will open for you His good treasure the heaven to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend unto many nations, but you shall not borrow. And Hashem will make you the head, not the tail ...".

Thus, the *berakhot* section can be divided into three subsections that reflect three separate aims:

1. Political supremacy: "Because you will hearken unto the voice of Hashem your God" (28:2).
2. Sanctity: "Because you shall keep the commandments of Hashem your God and walk in His ways" (28:9).
3. Economic eminence: "Because you will hearken to the commandments of Hashem your God, which I command you this day, to observe and to do them" (28:13).

In other words, the organization of the *berakhot* section is based on three broader goals. The specific *berakhot*, such as timely rainfall and military victory, are means to achieve those broader aims.

With this in mind, we are ready to take a closer look at the *kelalot* section and see whether a parallel division can be detected there as well.

3. The Kelala Section

The analysis of the *berakhot* section is simpler because of its relative brevity. Discerning divisions within the lengthy *kelalot* section will be a more difficult and complicated task; if you have not done so yet, it would be helpful to open a *Chumash*.

In order to illustrate a parallel between the organizational structure of the *berakha* section and the *kelala* section, we must take note of the phrase "because you will not hearken to the voice of Hashem your God," parallel to refrain "because you will hearken unto the voice of Hashem your God," which indicated the division of the *berakha* section.

The *kelala* section begins:

But it shall come to pass, **if you will not hearken unto the voice of Hashem your God**, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command you this day; that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you (28:15).

Later in this section, Moshe says:

And all these curses shall come upon you and shall pursue you and overtake you, till you are destroyed; **because you did not hearken unto the voice of Hashem your God**, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you (28:45).

This redundant phrase appears once again towards the end of the section:

And you shall be left few in number, whereas you previously were numerous as the stars of heaven; **because you did not hearken unto the voice of Hashem your God**. (28:62).

I would like to suggest that this repeated phrase is the refrain of the *kelala* section and indicates a three part division, parallel to the division we observed regarding the *berakhot*.

The first segment spans *pesukim* 15- 37. The section begins with a list of *kelalot* that mirror the *berakhot* at the beginning of the first section. The subsequent list of *kelalot* begins with calamities that will befall Yisrael in the Land of Israel, including defeat at the hand of enemies and suffering the torments of the invading forces. The segment ends with exile.

I suggest that this segment, which details the military defeat and the exile, mirrors the segment of political superiority found in the *berakhot* section, which stressed victory. In fact, this *kelalot* segment concludes by describing how terribly Yisrael is perceived by the nations they are exiled to – "And you shall become an [object of] astonishment, an example, and a topic of discussion, among all the peoples whither Hashem

shall lead you" (28:37) – which counters “*elyon* over all the nations” of the *berakha* section.

In *pasuk* 38, Moshe describes Yisrael as still being on their land, and I therefore suggest that this is the beginning of the second segment. This subsection mirrors *pesukim* 12- 13 of the *berakhot* section, which deal with economic eminence, and it is therefore reasonable that this segment describes an economic downfall. As we saw above, one of the concluding *pesukim* of this segment is almost an exact repeat of the opening line of the *kelalot* section – "All these curses will befall you, pursuing you and overtaking you to destroy you because you did not obey Hashem your God, to observe His commandments and statutes which He commanded you"(28:45) – and this repetition is an additional indication that we are in a new subsection.

I believe that the final segment begins at *pasuk* 47. This subsection focuses on the dehumanization of Yisrael. There is a detailed description on the subhuman conditions during the siege. People who were noble and aristocratic are driven to act like animals, selfishly devouring the flesh of their own children. This subsection counters the promise of sanctity found in the *berakha* section; it describes not only the defilement of *kedushat Yisrael* (the sanctity of Yisrael), but the desecration *tzelem Elokim* (the divine image) as well.

The segment ends with the chilling prophesy:
And Hashem will bring you back to Egypt in ships, through the way about which I had said to you, you will never see it again. And there, you will seek to be sold to your enemies for slaves and handmaids, but there will be no buyer (28:62).

The fact that Jews are not even worthy to be bought is a subtle reference to the total desecration and profanation of Yisrael, which eventually justifies annihilation. It is reminiscent of Esther's statement: "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish; now had we been sold for slaves and bondswomen, I would have kept silent, for the adversary has no consideration for the king's loss" ([Esther 7:4](#)). We are also reminded of the Nazis, who considered Jews to be vermin earmarked for extermination. Slavery, despite the economic advantages, was an inappropriate solution to the Jewish question.

IV. Means and Ends

We have suggested an organization of the Moav covenant based on an inner division between three overarching aims: political supremacy, sanctity and economic eminence. What is the significance of these three ideas?

Political supremacy should be connected to divine sovereignty, since *malkhut Yisrael* is an earthly representative of *malkhut Hashem*. In fact, the term “*elyon*,” which Moshe uses to express the supremacy of Yisrael, is often used as a reference to Hashem (see [Bereishit 14](#)). Consider the *tefilla* of Rosh Hashana:

Reign over the entire world in Your glory and rise above the land in Your splendor and appear in the glory of Your majestic might to all the inhabitants of the world and everything that has been made shall know

that You made it and every creature shall understand that You created it and all that breathe shall proclaim: "Hashem the God of Yisrael is king and His reign is over all."

Since universal recognition of *malkhut Hashem* is one of the aims of creation, the overarching significance of the political supremacy of *malkhut Yisrael* is obvious as well.

As opposed to the universalistic significance of *malkhut Yisrael*, *kedushat Yisrael* (the sanctity of Yisrael) in a large part relates to the intimate relationship between Hashem and Yisrael. In order to achieve this sanctity, we must not only observe the *mitzvot*, but also emulate the divine attributes (28:9). Moreover, we must live a life of sanctity and holiness, as it sees, "You shall be Holy, for I Hashem your God Am holy ([Vayikra 19:2](#)). This intimate relationship between Hashem and Yisrael, is one of the major themes of Yom Kippur, when the *kohen gadol* (high priest) enters the inner sanctum to achieve penitence for all of Yisrael. In any event, the view of *kedusha* as an overarching goal is clear.

However, we are a bit perplexed by the importance the Torah awards to economic eminence. Moreover, consider the *pesukim* that precede and perhaps introduce the covenant: "And Hashem has selected you this day to be His treasured people ... And to make you *elyon* above all the nations that He made ... and to make you a holy people to Hashem your God, as He spoke (26:18-19). *Elyon* and *kedusha* are mentioned, while economic prosperity is left out.

Perhaps, the overarching importance of economic eminence is as a means, not as an end. In *Hilkhot Teshuva* (chapter 9), the Rambam was troubled by the emphasis the Torah placed on worldly rewards. He suggests that these rewards are a means necessary to create an environment that will allow one to achieve the spiritual goals that are the ultimate goal. Similarly, we can suggest that the Torah, with its focus on reality, notes the overarching importance of economic prosperity, but only as a means to enable Yisrael to realize its destiny as a holy people and an earthly representative of *malkhut Hashem*.