

BS"D Parashat Va'et'chanan

5782

Shabbat Nachamu, 15th of Menachem Av 5782

Moshe declared before the Jewish nation Devarim 4,5-8):

וְיַדְעֵהוּ מִזְרָחָ-וּ 'מִזְרָחָה וְמִזְרָחָה תְּהִלָּתְךָ תְּהִלָּתְךָ (ו
:מִזְרָחָה וְמִזְרָחָה תְּהִלָּתְךָ תְּהִלָּתְךָ

תְּהִלָּתְךָ תְּהִלָּתְךָ תְּהִלָּתְךָ תְּהִלָּתְךָ תְּהִלָּתְךָ (ו
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⁵ *See! I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it.*

⁶ *Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding before the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.*

⁷ *What other nation is so great as to have their God near*

them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we call to Him?

⁸ *And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this Torah I am setting before you today?*

The goal was to create an unprecedented God-fearing society, so that even the idolatrous nations of the world would be influenced by the wisdom and intelligence of the Creator and the greatness of His chosen people, Am Yisrael. Today, however, the world is more impressed with the scientific findings of our Weizmann Institute and the discoveries of our Technion, than the way we uphold our Shabbat or the attention by which we choose our kosher food or the diligence we practice in the study of our Torah.

Many good Jews observe the Torah, yet we are not making any headway in breaking the klipa (shell) of anti-Semitism that girdles the majority of gentiles. Where did we go wrong? And obviously we did go wrong, because the verse states: "Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people". Implying that if the nations are unimpressed with the Jewish people's spiritual "wisdom and understanding," there is clearly a fundamental failure in our Torah observance.

I suggest:

The incidents leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple are recorded in Tractate Gitin beginning with page 55b.

A Jew by the name of Bar Kamtza, who was close to the Roman aristocracy, was highly insulted when he was publicly requested to leave a wedding party. He took revenge on the Jewish community by convincing Caesar (or another highly placed Roman official) to send an animal to the Temple in

order to see if the Kohanim would accept the offering. The Roman sent an animal with Bar Kamtza, who intentionally made a cut in its lip (or ear) to render the animal invalid to be a sacrifice for a Jew, but still valid for a gentile. So far so good!

However, a prominent Kohen by the name of Zechariah ben Avkulas used his position to reject the sacrifice on the grounds that non-learned Jews could conclude that it is permissible to sacrifice animals with physical blemishes, without discerning between blemishes of this type which are permitted for the sacrifice of a gentile but not for a Jew.

At the alternate suggestion that Bar Kamtza be killed so that he would not reveal to the Romans that the Kohanim rejected the sacrifice, Zechariah ben Avkulas again objected on the grounds that people might mistakenly conclude that one who causes a blemish in an animal intended for a sacrifice is liable for the death penalty.

Under the circumstances, Bar Kamtza was set free. He then informed the Roman that his sacrifice was rejected, which eventually ended in the Temple's destruction.

This historical incident is preceded in the Gemara (ibid) with the verse from Proverbs 28,14, as a means of summarizing the actions of the people who brought the nation to tragedy.

: בָּרוּךְ הוּא הַמְּלֵא קְנָתָיו וְבָרוּךְ הוּא הַמְּלֵא עֲוֹנָתָיו

Praised is the one who calculates the results of his actions, but whoever hardens his heart (obsessively) falls into evil.

Bar Kamtza was obsessive in his desire for revenge, but so too was the host of the wedding feast who embarrassed Bar Kamtza without considering the possible implications of his act, as well as the rabbis who were witness to this embarrassing ejection but did nothing to placate Kamtza.

But the severest criticism was saved for Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas who was so stubbornly fearful of violating the halacha that he became impervious to the potential disaster he was creating. Had he allowed sacrificing the animal which was halachically permitted (being the animal of a gentile), the Temple might not have been destroyed. But his intransigent obsession – lest some ignoramus misinterpret what was done in the Temple (what we call today a “chumra”) without calculating the possible religious, social, and national repercussions of his severities – brought about the destruction of the Temple.

The issue can be illustrated as follows: Halachot are like building stones of different sizes and colors and the rabbinic decisions about how and when to implement a particular halacha is the mortar which binds halachot together. A rabbi may not overturn a halacha, just as a laborer cannot change the color or size of the bricks. However, just as a laborer must choose which stone to use at a particular stage, a rabbi must use his knowledge and experience when applying a particular halacha and its supplementary severities (chumrot).

The Gemara (Sota 21b) uses the term “chasid shoteh” – a righteous fool, to describe one whose irrational, rigid and scrupulous failed misunderstanding of the halacha causes tragedy. As in the case of a drowning woman, where instead of saving her the chasid shoteh looks the other way lest he see her in an immodest situation.

The application of Torah today by certain influential chareidi leaders is aimed at an hermetically-sealed group. This group has no desire to emphasize the beauty and wisdom of Yiddishkeit as a way of life for a nation in this modern era, and by so doing has shown the wrong face of what we really are. The most devastating mistake of the chareidi sector is its refusal to recognize the hand of God in the establishment, survival and thriving of our holy Medina.

The weak link in their chain of thought and the mother of all

mistakes is their premise that our return to Eretz Yisrael must be headed by great Torah scholars and not by secular Jews, like those who spearheaded the Zionist movement at the beginning of the last century.

There are two fallacies in this thinking.

One: If the return to Zion was so dear to their hearts, why was the ideal of a Jewish State not initiated by the religious leaders of the time? And why were there so few rabbis who established the "Mizrachi" organization which became part of the World Zionist organization? And why, even now after seeing the great miracles of HaShem, do they still withdraw into the ideological isolation of "Mashiach Now," instead of becoming partners in the major institutions of the Medina, like the military and the workforce?

Two: In chapter 9 (parashat Aikev) Moshe recalls the devastating sins of the Jews in the desert perpetrated by the people standing in front of him and by their fathers, including the sin of the Golden Calf and the refusal to enter the Promised Land.

וְיַדְעֵה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר-בָּא אֵלָנוּ 'וְיַדְעֵה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ (ו
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⁶ *Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.*

⁷ *Remember this and never forget how you aroused the anger of the Lord your God in the wilderness. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the Lord.*

¹³ *And the Lord said to me, "I have seen this people, and they are a stiff-necked people indeed!"*

¹⁴ Let me alone, so that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven. And I will make you into a nation stronger and more numerous than they."

¹⁹ *I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the Lord listened to me.*

²² You also made the Lord angry at Taberah, at Massah and at

Kibroth Hattaavah.

²³ *And when the Lord sent you out from Kadesh Barnea, he said, "Go up and take possession of the land I have given you." But you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. You did not trust him or obey him.*

²⁴ *You have been rebellious against the Lord ever since I have known you.*

But with all this very disturbing behavior, HaShem still said to Moshe (10,11):

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¹¹ “Go,” the Lord said to me, “and lead the people on their way, so that they may enter and possess the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.”

In no way can one compare the conduct of the so-called secular Zionists to the huge transgressions of the Jews in the desert. And, nevertheless, HaShem brought the generation of the desert into Eretz Yisrael in fulfillment of His promise to our fathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov.

And today we are living the greatest of miracles surpassing all human rationality – we have survived 2000 years of exile and the unspeakable Shoah, and even the secular in Eretz Yisrael adamantly demand to remain sons and daughters of the Jewish nation.

Many chareidi leaders have much to contemplate and much to change, and this week's parasha is a good place to begin.

Unfortunately, a bitter joke I heard has become the bitter

reality in many chareidi circles. The season of the archeological dig in search of remnants of the Second Temple period ended, and the head of the dig turned in his report. The only thing we found remaining from the period is the sin'at chinam (unwarranted hatred).

FOR THE 15th OF MENACHEM AV

The Mishna in Tractate Ta'anit states: "There were no happier days (yamim tovim) than Yom Kippur and the 15th of Av." In Tractate Ta'anit of the Jerusalem Talmud our sages state that the reason Yom Kippur is a yom tov is obvious, for on this day our sins are eradicated. However, they ask, what transpired on the 15th of Av to elevate it to the level of happiness of Yom Kippur?

And the Gemara explains that on this day Hoshea ben Ela, King of the Northern tribes of Israel, rescinded the edict prohibiting the Jews of the northern tribes to go up to Yerushalayim.

In order to fully appreciate what this meant, let's return to 300 years prior to the time of Hoshea ben Ela. The arch-evil Yeravam ben Nevat incited the people of the northern tribes to secede from the union that had begun with King Shaul, followed by King David, King Shlomo and the then King Rechav'am, son of Shlomo Ha'melech.

In order to complete the secession, Yeravam began expounding the Torah in his own way, thereby creating the first reform movement; but the formal act of secession was accomplished by closing the roads to Yerushalayim.

He created two substitute spiritual centers – Bet El, and Dan in the north – knowing that as long as the connection to Yerushalayim existed, his break away nation would not endure.

Yeravam imposed a harsh prohibition on going to Yerushalayim and placed police along the entire border. This situation continued for over three hundred years, during which time the Jews of the north were severed from Yerushalayim and the Holy Temple.

Upon ascending the throne, Hoshea ben Ela withdrew the border guards and opened the way to Yerushalayim – and this happened on the 15th of Av.

Indeed, this was a day to parallel Yom Kippur, for now the Jews would be able to offer korbanot in the Mikdash and achieve atonement for their sins.

After this explanation in the Jerusalem Talmud, Rav Kahana asks: If Hoshea was such a great man, why then did HaShem permit Shalmanetzer, King of Assyria, to invade the northern tribes and exile all the Jews in Hoshea's time?

The Talmud answers that Hoshea ben Ela opened the way to Yerushalayim – BUT NO ONE CAME!

Hoshea ben Ela was punished because he did not use his authority to prod and encourage the people to renew their covenant with the holy city.

And the Gemara explains that in the 300 years when pilgrimage to the Holy City was prohibited by the evil kings of Yisrael, the heavenly court could not accuse the people of the north of neglecting their responsibilities to Yerushalayim. However, when the government of Hoshea permitted the movement of people to the Holy City, there was no longer an excuse for not going. It was as if HaShem were saying, "You did not come to My house, so I will eject you from your houses."

Hence, this day is most appropriate for the rabbis in today's lands of the galu'yet to declare Rabbis' Day, because they are continuing in the tradition of Hoshea ben Ela by not utilizing their authority and influence to encourage their congregations

to leave the exile to return home.

When was the last time your rabbi stood at the pulpit and banged his fist on the lectern demanding that the congregation “go up to the Land, as I am about to do?”

Remember the mantra “He who does not make kiddush, HaShem will make for him Havdalah”. If you don’t understand what this means, ask your local rabbi.

Shabbat Shalom and have a happy 15th of Menachem Av,

Nachman Kahana

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