**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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This parasha series is being dedicated

in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

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**PARASHOT NITZAVIM-VAYELEKH**

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The Yeshiva and the VBM wish a very warm mazal tov to Rav Elyakim and Sarah Krumbein on the marriage of their daughter Chava to Gershon Bass. (Rav Krumbein is author of our forthcoming Musar series.) Yehi ratzon she-tizku livnot bayit ne'eman be-Yisrael!

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The Yeshiva and the VBM also wish a very warm mazal tov to Rav Menachem and Gila Weinberg on the birth of their son Yashiv. (Gila is translator of our Kuzari series.) Yehi ratzon she-tizku le-gadlo le-Torah, chuppa, u-ma'asim tovim!

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Israel's Repentance (Devarim 30:1-10)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. THE COVENANT OF DEVARIM

Parashat Nitzavim is always read on the last Shabbat of the year, and the ten verses with which chapter 30 opens – generally called "parashat ha-teshuva," the section on repentance – thus serve to prepare us for the days of judgment and atonement that await us. Let us examine this parasha more closely.

Parashat ha-teshuva depicts Israel's future return to God and God's return to them. This parasha is a continuation and conclusion of the lengthy section of "the blessing and the curse" enumerated previously in parashat Ki-Tavo, as is easily demonstrated by a linguistic comparison between them. Together, they form "the covenant of Sefer Devarim."

On the basis of a close analysis of the differences between the "blessings and curses" in Sefer Vayikra (parashat Bechukkotai) and in Sefer Devarim, the Ramban (Vayikra 26:16) concludes that the curses in parashat Bechukkotai refer to the first exile (to Babylonia), while "the covenant in Mishneh Torah (Sefer Devarim) hints at our present exile and the redemption from it." Regarding the covenant in our Sefer, he continues as follows:

"At first glance, it seems that there is no hint at an end or conclusion, and that no redemption is promised; it is dependent solely on teshuva... The redemption in this second covenant is a more complete and elevated redemption than the others... and the things promised for the future redemption are a more complete promise than all the visions of Daniel."

B. PRECONDITION OR PROMISE?

Let us now closely analyze the first three verses of chapter 30. These contain a clause of precondition and a clause of result, but the distinction between them is unclear.

The syntax of the Torah gives rise to certain instances where only exegetical considerations, based on the content of the verses, can aid us in deciding whether a certain clause is to be understood as the condition or as the result. A sentence beginning with the letter "vav" can be interpreted either way. Such is the case in our instance. Let us examine the various interpretive possibilities and their ramifications.

I. CONDITION: "And it shall happen when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have given before you,

RESULT: You shall recall them to your heart among all the nations where God has driven you... And you shall return to Hashem your God and listen to His voice, and God will return your captivity and have mercy on you..."

According to this analysis, the condition defines the time-frame for the consequence. But the consequence itself can be understood in two different ways:

a. "And you shall recall them to your heart," "and you shall return to God" – this is a prophetical promise as to what will occur at that time. The Rambam (Hil. Teshuva 7:5) seems to adopt this understanding.

b. "And you shall recall them," "and you shall return" – this is a commandment, and it becomes obligatory in exile, when the blessings and curses have been realized. This is the Ramban's understanding.

II. CONDITION: "And it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse... and you recall them to your heart... and you shall return to Hashem your God and listen to His voice...

CONSEQUENCE: Then Hashem your God will return your captivity and have mercy on you, and come back and gather you from among all the nations..."

According to this analysis, the condition defines both the time-frame and the circumstances for the consequence: only if in exile you engage in soul-searching and then return to God and listen to Him, THEN you will merit redemption from that exile. This would seem to reflect the understanding of the Ibn Ezra (beginning of chapter 30).

The variety of interpretive possibilities for these verses, and their ramifications concerning the teshuva of Am Yisrael in exile – whether it be a promise or a mitzva – are quite confusing. It seems that this characteristic of biblical style, which sometimes blurs the distinction between a conditional clause and a consequent one, is employed intentionally in order to create different exegetical possibilities and intentional equivocations. (This applies in particular in places where there is a string of verbs, some of which represent the consequences of preceding ones, while simultaneously serving as preconditions for subsequent ones.)

There is no qualitative contradiction between these two readings: it may be that the teshuva of Israel in exile is a mitzva, and at the same time that the fulfillment of this mitzva represents a precondition for their redemption. It may even be that the teshuva of Israel in exile is a promise, but only after this promise is fulfilled can the process of redemption and the ingathering of the exiles begin, and therefore this promise is a precondition for the fulfillment of the other promise.

It appears, therefore, that all the possibilities raised by the various commentators quoted above are indeed included in these verses, and that the verses are intentionally formulated in such a way as to allow for different readings among which some compromise should be sought.

C. ISRAEL'S RETURN AND GOD'S RETURN

This stylistic feature continues to characterize parashat ha-teshuva up until just before the end. The parasha contains a series of verbs beginning with the letter "vav" which is simultaneously both conversive (changing the tense of the verb from past into future) and also conjunctive (adding each new verb onto those that precede it). Thus each action described in this parasha is both the consequence of its preceding one and the condition for the subsequent one. In this way the Torah describes two processes which promote one another and are interdependent: a human act – the teshuva of Israel, and a Divine act – their redemption.

Let us present parashat ha-teshuva in such a way as to highlight the distinction between the human act of teshuva and the Divine act of redemption, and at the same time to highlight the alternating order of verbs and the order of their connection with one another. We will assign a capital letter to each section (section A, section B, etc.), and will denote human action by (i) and divine action by (ii).

"And it will be when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I give before you,

(i) A. And you RECALL them to your hearts among all the nations where Hashem your God has driven you,

And you RETURN to Hashem your God and listen to His voice in all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your hearts and with all your souls,

(ii) B. Then God will RETURN your captivity and have mercy on you, and HE WILL COME BACK and gather you from all the nations where Hashem your God has dispersed you.

Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the heavens, from there Hashem your God will gather you and from there He will take you, and Hashem your God will bring you to the land which your forefathers possessed, and you shall possess it, and He will perform good for you and multiply you more than your fathers.

(i) C. And Hashem your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants tlove Hashem your God with all your hearts and with all your souls, in order that you may live.

(ii) D. And Hashem your God will place all these curses upon your enemies and upon those who hate you, who have persecuted you.

(i) E. And you will RETURN and obey the voice of God and perform all His mitzvot which I command you today.

(ii) F. And Hashem your God will make plentiful all your endeavors; the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your animals and the fruit of the land – for the good, for God WILL AGAIN (lit., return to) rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers."

(i) G. If you will listen to the voice of Hashem your God, to observe His mitzvot and statutes written in this book of the Torah, (and) if you will return to Hashem your God with all your hearts and with all your souls."

D. UNDERSTANDING THE PROGRESSION

Let us now try to understand the development of this dual process described in parashat ha-teshuva, stage by stage, with the assistance of the above table. Firstly, let us look at the general structure of the parasha. It begins with a sort of introduction, containing the only clause which we can say with certainty is a conditional one: "And it will be when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse..." This lays the groundwork for all that follows: the realization of the blessing and – more importantly – the curse will give rise to the process of Israel's teshuva in exile, while the process of their redemption is aimed at nullifying the curse and bringing back the blessing.

Subsequently, parashat ha-teshuva continually alternates between Israel's teshuva towards God and their redemption by God's hand, because these two processes are interdependent. Note that the process described in the parasha begins and ends with Israel's teshuva, denoted by (i).

The root "sh-u-v" (return) is repeated seven times in the parasha and serves as a leading word. Four of these seven appearances are to be found in the "teshuva" section ('i'), while three occur in the "redemption" section ('ii'). Nevertheless, the use of a common root for the description of these two processes indicates their reciprocity: Israel returns to God, and God returns to Israel and returns them to His land – as summarized by the prophet Malakhi: "RETURN to Me and I SHALL RETURN to you."

Another leading word in the parasha is God's name, which appears 14 times (of which 12 are in the form of "Hashem your God"). Here, interestingly, there is equality between the two halves.

Let us now look at each stage of the process independently as well as in context:

SECTION A: The starting point for the process is Israel's teshuva in exile. Whether this teshuva is defined as a mitzva or as a divine promise, it nevertheless simultaneously serves as the precondition for the beginning of the process of redemption in stage B.

The root "sh-u-v" appears twice here, but with different meanings. We first encounter it in the causative case – "And you shall recall it to your hearts," meaning that "You shall take it to heart, to observe with attention." But the object of the sentence is absent: what is it that we are to recall to our hearts? The answer is to be found in the "introduction" to the parasha: you shall take to hearts that all the things concerning which you were forewarned, the blessing and the curse, have come upon you. This observation of the historical fate of Israel gives rise to the conclusion that, as we say in our prayers, "Because of our sins we were exiled from our country." This national soul-searching then brings about the second appearance of the root "sh-u-v," namely, Israel's teshuva: "And YOU SHALL RETURN to Hashem your God and listen to His voice... YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN, with all your hearts and with all your souls."

SECTION B: Although section A and section B each contain two appearances of the root "sh-u-v," seeming to set up an equivalence, in truth God's movement towards Israel exceeds their movement towards Him. "Open for Me one opening of teshuva as small as the eye of a needle, and I will open for you openings through which entire wagons will enter" (Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba 5:3). While only the second verb in section A expresses a movement of Israel towards God, in section B both verbs express a movement of God towards Israel. There are several additional verbs which express this even more strongly: "He will have mercy on you... He will gather you up... He will take you... He will bring you... He will perform good for you and multiply you." The Divine action for the benefit of Israel in section B is comprised of many stages, encompassing a vast scope of time and space. This action includes the ingathering of ALL the exiles - from every place to which they have been dispersed, bringing them to Eretz Yisrael, causing them to possess the land and multiplying them there for the good.

The superiority of B. over A. is expressed quantitatively in the number of verses and the number of words (38 vs. 27), as well as in the number of times that God's name is repeated (4 vs. 2).

SECTION C: The inclusion of part C in section 'i' of the parasha at first seems incorrect: it appears to be a direct continuation of the Divine action towards Israel that was described in part B. But the content of this part justifies its placement here: God's action towards Israel here is not in the sphere of their physical redemption (as it was in part B), but rather in the spiritual realm. "Circumcision of the heart" means removal of the covering that seals it; it is a metaphor for spiritual freedom to open the heart to positive spiritual action. This action is "to love Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Clearly, love of God is an action undertaken by Israel of their own free will, and therefore this part properly belongs in the half of the parasha that describes Israel's teshuva. The vocabulary of this part likewise indicates this: "Your hearts and the hearts of your children" corresponds to what was said in part A – "you and your children;" "with all your hearts and with all your souls" is an expression that is repeated in A. and in F. Thus, all three of its appearances occur in section 'i' of the parasha.

Why, then, is Israel's teshuva at this stage attributed to God Who has "circumcised their hearts?" The answer to this is connected with the fact that part C follows part B: the spiritual change that occurs in Israel in C. is the result of the same bold Divine action on behalf of Israel and their redemption. The ingathering of the exiles and the good that God brings to Israel in their own land are what lead to the "circumcision of their hearts." Israel, in returning to the land of their forefathers, "recall to their hearts" (as in A.) all the good that God has bestowed upon them, and their hearts are opened to LOVE God. Here we notice the difference between the teshuva that took place in exile (in A.) and that that takes place later in Eretz Yisrael (in C.): in exile, observation of Israel's historical fate – the troubles and suffering that God brought upon them – brought about teshuva towards God and listening to His voice. Although this teshuva is wholehearted and sincere, it is born of fear. But in Eretz Yisrael the observation of the great good that God has bestowed upon Israel – in bringing them to their land and granting them great favor – brings about an opening of the hearts, and renewed love on the part of Israel: love of God with all their heart and soul.

SECTION D: Parallel to the "circumcision of the hearts" in the sphere of Israel's teshuva, referring to a sort of surgical procedure, as it were, to remove that which is redundant and harmful, there is a similar action that takes place in the sphere of redemption: "And Hashem your God will place all these curses upon your enemies and those that hate you, and have persecuted you."

Israel's return to the land and their dwelling in it surrounded with good and comfort does not erase the injustices shown towards them by their enemies while in exile. The process of teshuva and redemption described here rests on the basis of contincontemplation of the past. Not only Israel are required to do this, but God too, in coming to redeem His people, remembers the hatred and persecution suffered by Israel in exile, and He transfers "these curses" suffered by Israel to their enemies and those who hate them. God's revenge on the enemies of Israel who have spilled their blood is a central foundation of the descriptions of redemption in the Torah, starting with our parasha, continuing through the song of Ha'azinu (32:40-43) and up until the visions of redemption in the Prophets.

The root "sh-u-v" does not appear in part D, nor in the preceding part C. The reason for this may be that what is described in these parts is not a RETURN to what happened in the past, but rather new levels of teshuva and redemption, unique to the process described in our parasha.

SECTION E: The similarity between part E and part A is confusing. Where is the progress here in the teshuva process?

In A. we read, "And you WILL RETURN TO GOD," and in E. we are told, "You will AGAIN (lit. "come back and") obey God's voice." Here the use of the word "come back" means a return to a previous stage. When in the past were Israel in a situation of obeying God's voice and performing His mitzvot? The answer is that this previous time refers to A., when Israel were still in exile!

SECTION F: Israel's RETURN to the situation of previous generations – obeying God and performing His mitzvot – causes God in turn to AGAIN relate to Israel as He related to their forefathers in the early generations, before they sinned and were punished: "For God will AGAIN rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your forefathers." The practical significance of this attitude on the part of God towards Israel is described in the first part of verse 9: "And God will make you plentiful in all your endeavors; in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your animals and in the fruit of your land, for the good." At this stage there are two developments – a promise of the good that God will perform for Israel, and a specification of the areas in which it will be expressed. But more important than these is the relationship revealed here between God and Israel: "to rejoice over you for the good." An expression of a "psychological" relationship with Israel is to be found at the beginning of the description of the redemption (C.): "And He will have mercy on you," and at its conclusion – "to rejoice over you." Thus all the actions that God performs for His nation in coming to redeem them are surrounded by prior mercy and subsequent rejoicing over them.

SECTION G: The final part of the parasha is comprised of two sentences that start with the word "if" (ki): "If you listen" and "if your return." The true meaning of this word here seems to be "since," and if this is so then this part contains a reason for God's actions towards Israel as described in the previous part, and perhaps in all the preceding parts (B., D., F.). This reason is set out in chiastic order in contrast with the description with which the process opens, in A.:

A: "And YOU WILL RETURN to HASHEM YOUR GOD,

AND OBEY HIS VOICE in all that I command you...

G: "Since YOU SHALL OBEY Hashem your God, to observe His mitzvot...

Since YOU SHALL RETURN to HASHEM YOUR GOD..."

The return to the same idea with which the parasha opened (although in reverse order) is a common biblical technique for the conclusion of a literary unit. Nevertheless, a careful reading shows that the conclusion describes a stage higher than that depicted at the start: teshuva TOWARDS ('el') God expresses a greater degree of closeness to God than teshuva TO ('ad') God. This greater closeness of Israel to God is obviously the result of God's closeness to Israel in the previous stages.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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