

A CRUEL REACTION

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Parshas Bechukosai

A Cruel Reaction

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Today's Learning:
Ma'asrot 3:5-6
O.C. 355:4-356:1
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Shabbat 26
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Makkot 9

A significant part of this parashah is devoted to the Tochachah / Rebuke, which foretells the troubles and punishments that will (and have) come upon the Jewish People when they sin. The Tochachah warns repeatedly that we will continue to suffer as long as we attribute our suffering to "keri" / "chance" rather than to our sins.

Rambam (Hil. Ta'anit ch. 1) writes that the Torah commands us to react to suffering with prayer and repentance. Rambam adds that one who does not do this, saying that his suffering is simply the way of the world, is "achzari" / "cruel."

What does Rambam mean by this expression? asks R' Shimson David Pinkus z"l (rabbi of Ofakim, Israel). At first glance, Rambam is saying that a person who fails to repent is "cruel" to himself, for he brings additional punishments upon himself. But that cannot be correct, says R' Pinkus, for every person who sins makes himself liable for punishment. Why would Rambam single out a person's failure to repent from all other sins?

Rather, explains R' Pinkus, Rambam's meaning is as follows: One who believes that suffering occurs by chance is accusing G-d of cruelty. He is suggesting that G-d created us, but then abandoned us. The teachers of Mussar / character development and ethics teach that one generally sees in others the faults that he himself has. Thus, one who would wrongly attribute cruelty to G-d must himself be

cruel. (Tiferet Torah)

"If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments . . ." (26:3)

Rashi writes that "If you will follow My decrees" refers to toiling in Torah study. If so, writes R' Akiva Yosef Schlesinger z"l (Hungary and Yerushalayim; died 1922), we can understand why this verse follows immediately after the verse, "My Sabbaths you shall observe." Specifically, the Midrash Tanna D'vei Eliyahu states that the primary time for Torah study is on Shabbat, when one is free from working.

(Torat Yechiel)

"Then they will confess their sin and the sin of their forefathers, for the treachery with which they betrayed Me . . . I, too, will behave toward them with casualness and I will bring them into the land of their enemies." (26:40-41)

Why, if Bnei Yisrael confess their sins, will Hashem behave toward them with casualness and bring them to the land of their enemies? R' Moshe Freidiger z"l (communal leader in Pest, Hungary) explains:

Teshuvah means confessing one's sins and not making excuses. Here, Bnei Yisrael will confess, but they will justify their actions by saying that their forefathers acted the same way. Such a "teshuvah" will be rejected.

(Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

"I will make the land desolate . . . And you--I will scatter among the nations . . . During all the days of her desolation, the land will rest; those sabbaticals that it did not observe while you were on the land, it will observe now." (26:32-35)

R' Avraham Yitzchak Kook z"l wrote: Upon being exiled, the Jewish people were freed of any national concerns; they rather turned their eyes and hearts heavenward. Jews were no longer preoccupied with the same concerns that draw the attention of the other nations, and, at the same time, Jews ceased to chase after the idols [literal and figurative] of the nations. The spirit of Hashem prompted the Jew to recognize the value of every soul, and, particularly, the spiritual worth of the Jewish nation. The Torah was appreciated more than fine gold and silver, just as in the nation's youth. Because of their holy faith, the Jews in exile went to martyrdom with love and happiness.

The Jew in exile always turned toward his land [Israel], but not as one who yearns for his home because it satisfies his hunger and his other physical needs. The Jew looked toward his land with a gaze filled with holiness; he looked toward its inner nature as the land that complements his yearning for G-d.

The time of the redemption is hidden. Who is privy to G-d's secret, knowing when the land and the nation will have been completely purified, that beloved time when the land and the nation will be reunited? Our sages have said that there is no greater sign of the onset of the redemption than the fulfillment of the verses from the Prophets: "And you, mountains of Israel, give forth your branches, present your fruits to My nation, Yisrael, for they are near to arrive." "And the cities will be settled and ruins will be rebuilt, and I will increase men and animals on the land and they will multiply . . ."

(Introduction to Shabbat Ha'aretz)

Pirkei Avot

"Ben Zoma says, 'Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion'." (4:1)

R' Yoel Sirkes z"l (the Bach; 1561-1640) explains: Every person's earnings are made up of two parts - the portion that a person is obligated to give as terumah, ma'aser, and charity, and the portion that is his to enjoy. Some people are not happy unless they keep both shares for themselves, but a truly wealthy person is the one who is content with keeping his own portion and giving the other portion to its rightful recipients.

(Meishiv Nefesh: Introduction)

"R' Yose says, 'Whoever honors the Torah will himself be honored by people'." (4:6)

Rashi explains: This refers to a person who does not put a sefer [e.g., a chumash or siddur] on a bench on which someone is sitting.

"If you neglect the study of Torah . . ." (4:10)

The Gemara (Chagigah 5b) states that there are three people over whom Hashem cries every day: (1) someone who is able to occupy himself ("la'asok") with Torah study, but who does not occupy himself thus; (2) someone who is unable to occupy himself with Torah study, but does occupy himself thus; and (3) a communal leader who acts haughtily. R' Ovadiah Yosef shlita writes: The second of these three descriptions requires explanation. [At first glance, the Gemara appears to be

speaking of a person who has many distractions that legitimately prevent him from studying Torah, yet he makes time to study anyway.] Why should G-d cry over such a person?

R' Yosef answers: This is not a correct understanding of the Mishnah. The term "to occupy oneself" / "la'asok" refers to advanced Torah study learning such as is necessary to render halachic decisions. The Gemara (Ta'anit 10b) records that Yosef told his brothers not to occupy themselves with Torah study on their return trip to Eretz Canaan. (See Bereishit 45:24 and Rashi.) Yet, the Gemara states that if two Torah scholars are traveling together and are not exchanging divrei Torah, they deserve to die. The Gemara itself resolves this contradiction by explaining that Yosef was referring to in-depth Torah study, while the other Talmudic statement is referring to less taxing study. Here, too, explains R' Yosef, what Hashem cries over is people who are not fit to render halachic rulings but do so anyway.

(Anaf Etz Avot)

R' Ezra Attiah z"l

R' Ezra Attiah was the rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Porat Yosef in Yerushalayim from 1925 to 1970, and was the mentor of many of the leading Sephardic sages of the second half of the 20th century. He was born in Aleppo, Syria in 1887, and was named after the prophet Ezra because his mother Leah had had several miscarriages before his birth and gave birth to him after praying at Ezra's grave in Tedef, Syria.

R' Attiah began his studies in Aleppo under R' Yehuda Aslan Attiah (possibly a distant relative), but he soon moved with his family moved to Yerushalayim. There he was recognized as an unusually diligent student, such that even after his father died (when R' Attiah was 20), three leading Sephardic sages took upon themselves to support him so he could continue his studies. (R' Yitzchak Nissim, who later became Chief Rabbi of Israel, credited witnessing R' Attiah's diligence with inspiring him to continue his own studies.) In 1907, R' Attiah began studying in the new Yeshivat Ohel Moed (which later became Porat Yosef) under R' Raphael Shlomo Laniado and R' Yosef Yedid. Before long, R' Yedid, one of the leaders of Syrian Jewry in Yerushalayim, took R' Attiah as his personal study partner.

Like many youth of the time, R' Attiah's studies were interrupted by World War I. R' Attiah fled to Egypt to avoid being drafted into the Ottoman Army. While there, he established Yeshivat Keter Torah in Cairo, which continued to exist until 1948. Returning to Eretz Yisrael, R' Attiah was soon appointed to head Yeshivat Porat Yosef and also to serve on the Sephardic Bet Din. R' Attiah continued to head Porat Yosef until his death, and among his students were R' Ovadiah Yosef (later Chief Rabbi of Israel and a widely accepted posek / halachic authority even among Ashkenazic Jews), R' Ben Zion Abba Shaul, and leading rabbis of the Syrian communities in the United States

and Panama.

Mirroring his own diligence as a youth, R' Attiah encouraged his students to study with dedication as well. He once said, "How can you tell who is a serious and diligent student? It is one who can study [the complex laws of] Choshen Mishpat after eating the Chamin ('chulent')."

R' Attiah was widely respected by Ashkenazic sages, and he respected them as well. The Chazon Ish told his students that R' Attiah's thought process was like that of a Rishon (an early medieval Torah scholar). For his part, R' Attiah used to attend meetings of Agudath Israel's Council of Torah Sages, saying that even though he could not understand them (they spoke in Yiddish), he was uplifted by seeing their gathering.

R' Attiah passed away on 19 Iyar 5730 / 1970.

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