

When the Chazan Raises his Voice

Category: Bechukosai, Vayikra

The frightening portion of the Tochacha ends with an optimistic note.

Despair

There are times when we know exactly what everyone is thinking about — or, rather, what we can't *stop* thinking about. It's difficult to focus on anything other than the horrific killing spree in Texas. Just a week ago, ten people were murdered in Buffalo, and the list seems to go on and on. It seems to only get worse as the years pass, with no change in sight.

The average citizen thinks to himself: "What can I possibly do? What change could I possibly bring that will actually change the situation for the better?" Usually, the only conclusion is to despair.

The Parsha

This week we read Parshat Bechukotai.

The portion begins in a very optimistic tone. "If you walk in my statutes," if we keep the Torah and the commandments, G-d promises us, "I will give rainfall in its season, and the earth will give its yield." There will be enough food for everyone. Then comes the greatest blessing of all: "I will give peace in the land ... and a sword will not pass through your land." This section of the parsha ends with the words, "And I will be your G-d and you will be My people."

Wonderful! It seems like a dream.

But then the Torah continues, "And if you will not listen to me..." At this point, the reader lowers his voice, because "here comes the bad news." For nearly thirty verses, the Torah describes what will be, G-d forbid, if the people of Israel do not follow the path of the Torah. Truthfully, when a Jew sits in the synagogue and listens to the Torah's rebuke, and in particular, to the verses which describe how the people of Israel will be exiled from their land (26:33), there is a good chance that he will feel the same feelings as we felt this week — he will go into despair.

But then right at the end, when he is already on the verge of despair, the reader's voice rises again, and he utters the following verse in a high voice and full of optimism: "Even though they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, to break My covenant with them, because I am the L-rd their G-d." (26:44). This verse is uplifting; we are encouraged, knowing that no matter the situation, in the end, G-d will never despair of us.

The Talmud in Tractate Megillah explains the verse in a wonderful way, showing us where in Jewish history we see this vision being fulfilled:

It goes through the entire verse:

"I will not reject them — in the days of the Chaldeans when I stood up Daniel, Chananya, Mishael, and Azaryah."

This is a reference to the period after the first Temple's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, when the Chaldeans controlled Babylon. The Jews of Jerusalem were exiled to Babylon where they underwent terrible suffering, and many were close to despair.

During that period, G-d gave them leaders like Daniel, Chananya, Mishael and Azarya. They were advisers to the king, and they faced a terrible test. The Book of Daniel (Chapter 3) tells us how King Nebuchadnezzar erected a huge golden statue that symbolized the kingdom of Babylon's eternal rule, and he commanded that everyone bow to the statue as the orchestra played. As all the people gathered and bowed to the statue — including Jews — these three stood out like a sore thumb and did not kneel. They were brought to the king, and when they persistently refused to bow to the statue, they were thrown into the fiery furnace. An amazing miracle occurred; they came out of the kiln alive and well!

This miracle gave the Jews the strength not to despair; "If we have such young people who are willing to burn alive and not bow to idols," they said, "then there is still hope!"

The Talmud continues with the next portion of the verse:

"...or spurn them — in the days of the Greeks, when I gave them Shimon Hatzaddik, the Hasmonean and his sons, and Matityahu the high priest."

During the Chanukah period, when the Greeks ruled the land of Israel, they forced Jews to give up the commandments. They forbade the observance of Shabbat, tefillin, circumcision, and so on. People were sentenced to death for circumcising their children, observing Shabbos and eating matzah. Everyone gave up on keeping the mitzvot; there was no hope. And then the Maccabees arose and declared, “Whoever is to G-d — with me!” They did not lose hope, and they fought to change the situation. Thanks to them, we got the holiday of Chanukah.

The next section of the verse:

“To destroy them — in the days of Haman, when I gave them Mordechai and Esther.”

The first person to plan a “Final Solution,” G-d forbid, was Haman, the Prime Minister of the most powerful kingdom of his time. He declared that he would annihilate the Jewish people, and again, the Jews were close to despair. But then, G-d had mercy on us and sent us Mordechai and Esther. Mordechai went out into the city streets dressed in sackcloth and ashes, crying loudly. But he did not despair; he told the Jews about the crisis and inspired them to return to Judaism and to keep Torah and mitzvos. This inspired Queen Esther to risk her life and beg before the king — without an invitation — provided that all the Jews of Shushan fasted three days and nights. She brought about the hanging of Haman and the salvation of the Jewish people — and thanks to them, we have the holiday of Purim.

The next section:

“To break My covenant with them — in the days of the Persions [or Romans] when I gave them the House of Rebbi and the wise men of the generations.”

Our sages identify this portion of the verse, “to break My covenant with them,” with the period after the destruction of the Second Temple, when the covenant of the Jewish people with the Torah was almost broken. In those days, Jews began to be scattered throughout the world. They no longer lived in large Jewish centers in Israel, Babylon and Egypt, but began to disperse to much farther lands, and there was a real fear that the “covenant would be broken,” that is, that the Torah would be forgotten by the Jewish people, G-d forbid. Remember that until then, the only thing that was permitted to be committed in writing was the five books of Moses

and the books of the prophets. The commentary on the Torah, that is, the Talmud and so on, were not allowed to be written, and had to be taught again and again from father to son and teacher to student. They were allowed to write down notes from their classes so that they would not forget, but there was no orderly compilation of the Oral Torah.

This was the case until “Rebbi,” Rabbi Yehuda the Prince. This leader of the Jewish people was very rich, and had good relations with the Romans. He “saw that the disciples were diminishing and troubles were increasing, and the Evil Empire was spreading throughout the world and gaining strength, and Jews were wandering and reaching the edges of the world...” (Rambam’s introduction to Mishneh Torah). He declared that it was a time of crisis when such change is permitted, and he began to write the Oral Torah.

With his decision, Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi ensured that the Torah would not be forgotten, and saved the Jewish people from assimilation. History has proven that those Jews who did not have the Oral Torah assimilated and disappeared; those who survived were the communities who preserved the Oral Torah.

In Our Generation

The same thing happened in the last generation. After the Holocaust which annihilated a third of the Jewish people, many fell into deep despair, thinking that the Jewish nation was about to disappear. In their eyes, there was no future and no hope. But then, Hashem gave us the Rebbe, who called for an “Offensive War,” calling on every Jew to go out and remind Jews of their traditions.

There were many who, at the time, argued that he didn’t stand a chance. Why would a Jew who is far from Torah and mitzvot want to embrace it? Yet, the Rebbe believed that there is a spark within every Jew that seeks to come back to G-d; light the spark and everything else will happen by itself. Indeed, we have witnessed a Jewish renaissance in the last generation; countless Jews have returned to their heritage and the trend continues every day.

The Talmud finishes with the conclusion of the verse:

“I am the L-rd, your G-d – in the future, when no nation will be able to rule over you” (Megillah 11a).

Jewish history teaches us that we must never give up hope. Just as we survived until this day, we will survive this challenge as well, and very soon, G-d will grant us the true and ultimate redemption.