

# The Unwanted Aliyah

Category: Bechukosai, Vayikra

*This parsha is full of curses and rebukes. But is there a silver lining?*

## The Honorable Tradition

Rabbi David Goldberg, who serves as a Shliach in São Paulo, Brazil, shared the following story .

His brother recently visited their mother in Crown Heights, and went to pray at the synagogue where their late father, Rabbi Yaakov Goldberg, used to pray. During the Torah reading, the gabbai approached him with a smile and said he had come on the right Shabbat. Every year, on this particular parsha, it was a tradition at the synagogue to honor his father with an aliyah, and since his father had passed, they were happy to extend the honor to him.

His brother was a bit surprised. He didn't remember his father having such a tradition, and asked the gabbai to explain.

Here's the story behind this honor.

Twice in the Chumash, there's a section known as the "Parsha of Rebuke," the "Tochechah" - the first in our parsha, Bechukotai, and the second at the end of Deuteronomy in Ki Tavo, where the rebuke is even longer.

Our parsha, Bechukotai, begins on a very optimistic note: "If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them... I will give you rains in their season, and the land will yield its produce," promising food in abundance and peace in the land, among other blessings. In short, life for a Jew in the Land of Israel will be like heaven on earth. But then comes the big "but": "If you do not listen to Me and do not observe all these commandments," things would go terribly wrong. As the reading continues, the verses become increasingly harsh and paint a very bleak picture.

Understandably, no one wants to be called up for the aliyah that includes the rebuke. The custom nowadays is for the Torah reader himself to say the blessings

without announcing his name aloud, and he reads the portion quickly and in a low voice.

Well, in the synagogue where his father used to pray, the Torah reader was a Kohen, and a Kohen can only receive the first aliyah. The rebuke is in the third, which means that the Torah reader couldn't take it. The first time this happened, they needed a volunteer, but no one in the congregation was willing to step up. Everyone sat and waited, and time was passing. It was not respectful to leave the Torah open without reading from it, and it was an inconvenience for the congregation—but nobody wanted the “honor.”

Finally, Rabbi Goldberg stood up and volunteered to take the aliyah.

From then on, it became “his aliyah.” Every time they reached the *tochecha*, everyone knew who would receive the honor. Now, the gabbai wanted to continue the tradition by honoring Rabbi Goldberg's son with the same aliyah—and his son acquiesced and continued the tradition.

## Why the Detail?

This raises a question:

Why does the Torah go into such detailed descriptions of all the terrible calamities that will befall the Jewish people if, heaven forbid, they do not observe the Torah? Why doesn't the Torah suffice with the warning given in the second paragraph of the Shema? The Torah says there that “if you diligently obey My commandments... I will give the rain for your land in its season...,” but it follows with the caution, “Beware, lest your heart be deceived and you turn away and serve other G-ds...” because then, “The heavens will shut up and there will be no rain, and the land will not yield its produce, and you will swiftly perish from the good land...”

The basic idea is fully expressed in those short lines. Why is the lengthy, severe detail of the rebukes in the parsha necessary? Why frighten us?

Some explain that this rebuke is actually for the benefit of the Jewish people. G-d knew that the time would come when the Temple would be destroyed, and the Jewish people would be exiled. When that happened, some would claim that the

Jewish people were no longer the chosen nation, using their exile and dispersion among enemy nations as proof. Even Jews might start to believe this notion.

Therefore, the Torah preemptively declares that such times will come because of our sins. This does not mean we are no longer the chosen people. On the contrary, it is part of the Divine grand plan for the Jewish people's future. Just as we were sent into exile in Egypt on a divine mission to bring there an awareness of G-d, so too, all the exiles are meant to prepare the world for the coming of Moshiach.

This idea is embedded within the rebuke itself.

## **The Innocents Abroad**

When the Torah discusses the exile of the Jewish people from their land, it states, "I will make the land desolate, and it will become desolate of your enemies who live in it." (Leviticus 26:32). Rashi comments, "This is a good measure for Israel, that their enemies will find no satisfaction in your land, which will remain desolate without its inhabitants."

This verse assures us that even when the Jewish people are exiled from their land, the enemies who come to settle there will find no joy there. They will be unable to develop it, and it will remain desolate until the Jewish people return to rebuild it.

In 1867, a young journalist named Mark Twain was sent by a prominent California newspaper to cover a visit to the Holy Land and report his impressions. His series of articles was eventually compiled into the book "The Innocents Abroad," which became a bestseller in the United States and beyond.

He wrote, "It seems to me that from all the lands there are for dismal scenery, Palestine must be the prince... It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land." He described the poverty, desolation, and lack of vitality of the people living in the Holy Land. Mark Twain was telling the truth—throughout the ages, all the nations that tried to settle and develop the land failed. It remained desolate.

## **More Words of Encouragement**

Now, there are some other good elements in the rebuke.

Toward the end of the rebuke, it says, “And I will bring them into the land of their enemies” (Leviticus 26:41). Rashi explains, “I Myself will bring them; this is a good measure for Israel.”

What exactly is so good about such a state? The Rebbe adds, “When they are in the land of their enemies, G-d Himself is with them. He does not leave them there and go elsewhere, heaven forbid... Rashi emphasizes this by saying, ‘He brings them back under His wings,; as the young child learning Chumash has already read the verse ‘And I carried you on eagles’ wings,’ where Rashi explains, ‘Like an eagle that carries its fledglings on its wings,’ due to love and concern for their safety... Similarly, here too, G-d is with the Jewish people and keeps them close to Him.” (Toras Menachem 5743 3:1748)

At the very end of the rebuke, we receive the best encouragement of all: “Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them, to destroy them” (Leviticus 26:44). G-d will never forsake us or replace us with another nation.

The sages of the Talmud explain that every phrase in the verse refers to another exile and calamity:

“I will not reject them—in the days of the Chaldeans, for I set up for them Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.” Even when the Chaldeans exiled the Jewish people to Babylon, there were leaders and prophets to guide them.

“I will not abhor them—in the days of the Greeks, for I set up for them Shimon the Righteous, the Hasmoneans, and Matityahu the High Priest” — in the story of Hanukkah, G-d provided leaders like Matityahu the Maccabee, who led the revolt, ensuring that the Jews did not assimilate.

“To destroy them—in the days of Haman, for I set up for them Mordechai and Esther.” Haman sought to destroy the Jewish people, but G-d sent Mordechai, who “would not kneel or bow,” teaching the world a lesson in Jewish pride.

“To annul My covenant with them—in the days of the Persians, for I set up for them the house of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince and the sages of the generations.” This refers to the period following the destruction of the Second Temple, known as the “Exile of Edom.” G-d provided leaders like Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, who compiled the Mishnah and thereby preserved the future of the Jewish people.

Wherever the Jews were, G-d protected them.

## **The Lesson**

My friends, since Simchat Torah, every morning when we wake up and read the news, we find that the situation is getting worse. Initially, it was only in Israel, but as time goes on, it spreads to Europe and other countries, and eventually, antisemitism has reached the United States.

When you read the news, it can lead to feelings of depression and even despair. That's when the parsha of rebuke comes and tells us: Jews, do not despair. There is no need to worry. G-d is here with us in exile, watching over us, carrying us under His wings, loving and embracing us. We are assured that we will get through this successfully. There is no reason to worry.