



קשר נצחי

The Eternal Bond

■ Israel and the Nations

The weekly portion of Parashat Bechukotai presents Israel with two options: An abundance of blessing if we follow G-d's Torah, and a very detailed series of severe punishments if we choose to ignore the commandments.

Upon studying this Parashah, we wonder why the Torah details and emphasizes these punishments so intensely. Would not the same deterrent effect be achieved if some of the details were left out? Why do we have to hear, for instance, the shocking account of “*you will eat your children's flesh*” (Vayikra 26,29)?

On the other hand, is there any positive message that can be gleaned from these terrible curses?

In truth, if we look closely at this very stern Torah portion, we will find that essentially, it contains a very encouraging message, one that is profound and unambiguous. It is given over to us directly via both the blessings and the verses of rebuke. The Torah's message is this: **The intense bonds linking G-d and His nation Israel are eternal and will never be detached, no matter what.**

It is stated clearly in this verse, following the list of punishments:

וְאִם גַּם זֹאת בְּהִיּוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם לֹא מֵאֲסַתִּים וְלֹא גְעֻלָּתִים לְכַלְתָּם
לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיהֶם.

*Even this: When they are in their enemies' land,
I will not become so disgusted with them that I would
destroy them and break My covenant with them,
for I am the Lord their G-d.* (verse 44)

Despite all our sins, Hashem will never violate His covenant with Israel.

We see a similar message earlier in Vayikra, in Parashat Acharei Mot:

וְכַפֵּר עַל הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִטְּמֵאוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִפְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטֹּאתֵם,
וְכִן יַעֲשֶׂה לְאַהֲל מוֹעֵד הַשְּׂכֵן אִתְּם בְּתוֹךְ טְמֵאוֹתֵם.

[Aharon the High Priest] will thus atone upon the Holy Ark for Israel's impurities and sins, and he shall do the same ritual in the Tent of Meeting, which dwells amongst them even when they are impure. (16,16)

The Sages of the Gemara learn from the last phrase in this verse a most basic tenet:

Even when Israel is impure, the Divine Presence is with them. (Yoma 56b)

Hashem dwells amidst the People of Israel at all times, regardless of their deeds and misdeeds, their sins and merits, their purities and impurities.

Does this mean that the People of Israel will also dwell forever in the Land of Israel regardless of their sins and impurities? Not at all. Our sovereignty and presence in the Land is, in fact, quite dependent on whether we deserve it or not. If we fulfill G-d's commands, the Land is ours, but if not, we will be "spewed out." This fundamental concept is also learned from a verse in Acharei Mot:

וְלֹא תִקְיָא הָאָרֶץ אֶתְכֶם בְּטִמְאַכֶּם אֶתָּהּ בְּאֲשֶׁר קִאָּה
אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵיכֶם.

Let not the Land vomit you out when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that preceded you. (Vayikra 18,28)

The Torah makes it quite clear that this is a realistic scenario. It is precisely what happened to the nations that lived in the Holy Land before the Nation of Israel arrived:

אַל תִּטְמְאוּ בְּכָל אֱלֹהִים, כִּי בְּכָל אֱלֹהִים נִטְמְאוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְשַׁלַּח מִפְּנֵיכֶם.

Do not defile yourselves with all the above, for in all these things were defiled the nations that I am driving out before you.

וַתִּטְמָא הָאָרֶץ וְאֶפְקֹד עֲוֹנָהּ עָלֶיהָ וַתִּקָּא הָאָרֶץ אֶת יִשְׁבֵיהָ.

And the Land became impure, and I remembered their sin, and the land vomited out its residents. (verses 24-25)

Eretz Yisrael does not tolerate any nation that sins, in any manner. If Israel sins, it can be thrown out of the Land, just as were the other nations.

But there is an essential difference between Israel and the nations, as we have said above, and we learn of it in Parashat Kedoshim:

וְלֹא תִלְכוּ בְחֻקֵּי הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר אָנִי מְשַׁלַּח מִפְּנֵיכֶם,
כִּי אֶת כָּל אֵלֶּה עָשׂוּ וְאָקֶץ בָּם.

Do not follow the customs of the nations that I have driven out before you, for they did all those things, and I became disgusted with them. (20,23)

Strong words! They teach us that Hashem totally “gave up” on the Canaanites who lived in the Holy Land, and expelled them permanently. In their place, Hashem brought in the People of Israel to inherit the Land, as we read in the very next verse:

וְאָמַר לְכֶם אַתֶּם תִּירְשׁוּ אֶת אֲדָמָתָם, וְאֲנִי אֶתְנַנֶּה לְכֶם לְרִשְׁתָּ אֹתָהּ...
I told you, “You will inherit their land, and I will give it to you so that you may inherit it...” (verse 24)

The concept of Israel’s “inheritance” of the Land further indicates that the Canaanites’ expulsion was quite permanent – as opposed to when Israel was later expelled. When Bnei Yisrael were forced out of their Land because of their sins, it was merely temporary and rectifiable, as we saw in the above-quoted verse concluding the passage in Bechukotai of punishments and curses:

וְאִם גַּם זֹאת בְּהֵיטֵם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם לֹא מְאַסְתִּים
וְלֹא גַעַלְתִּים לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם...
Even this: When they are in their enemies’ land, I will not become so disgusted with them that I would destroy them and break My covenant with them... (26,44)

Even when Israel sins very badly, and Hashem is forced to say “*I will abhor you*” (verse 30), the situation does not deteriorate to the point of “*I would destroy them*” (verse 44) as He did with the Canaanites. Even when Hashem punishes Israel, it is not permanent.

■ Temporary Replacements

What then is the status of other nations that conquer the Holy Land and (temporarily) take Israel’s place? The answer to this, too, is found in the verses of rebuke in Bechukotai:

וְהִשְׁמַתִּי אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁמְמוּ עָלֶיהָ אֵיבֵיכֶם הַיֹּשְׁבִים בָּהּ.

*I will cause the Land to be desolate,
and your enemies living there will dwell in its desolation.* (26,32)

“Yes, your enemies will live there,” Hashem says, “but they will not find great satisfaction or permanence in doing so. They will not succeed in ‘making the desert bloom,’ and they will not be able to turn it into a center of national growth.”

The message is clear: There is only one nation that actually belongs to and owns the Holy Land, and only that nation, the People of Israel, can turn its desolate wastelands into flowering oases. Today, of course, we know that this is not merely an “interpretation” of this verse, but dynamic, live reality: The land lay fallow for century after century, and only when we, Israel, returned, did it begin to give forth its fruits so bountifully.

We have seen how this concept plays out across several different Parashot, and now we will see it spelled out and summed up in one single verse, at the end of Bamidbar:

וְלֹא תִטְמֵא אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אִתְּם יֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שׁוֹכֵן בְּתוֹכָהּ,
כִּי אֲנִי ה' שׁוֹכֵן בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

*Do not defile the Land upon which you live and in which I dwell,
for I, G-d, dwell among the Children of Israel.* (Bamidbar 35,34)

This verse is from a passage emphasizing the severity of the crime of murder and of receiving any form of soul-ransom from the murderer. The verse lays down the foundations of the bonds between G-d and Israel, as follows:

1. The Divine Presence always dwells within the Nation of Israel.
2. As a result, when Israel is at home in the Land of Israel, Hashem, too, is found there.
3. In Eretz Yisrael, the bonds between G-d and Israel are openly manifest, in a manner known as *Gilui Shechinah*, the Revelation of the Divine Presence.
4. *Gilui Shechinah* includes: Ongoing prophecy, open miracles in the Beit HaMikdash, and economic and military success.
5. But – Israel’s sins can defile the Land, leading to the disappearance of the Divine Presence, a prophetic vacuum, and massive expulsion of Israel from the Land.

This is why G-d warns us in this verse: *“Do not cause the Land upon which you live, and in which I dwell, to be defiled via your sins, for I dwell amidst Bnei Yisrael.”* For only here, in this Land, are we able to merit the actual revelation of G-d’s presence and of His bonds with us, via Prophecy. Only in this Land do we thrive, grow and receive blessing. But if we defile it with our sins, the impurity thus caused will lead to our eviction from the Land.

Even if this happens, G-d promises that His bonds with us will continue forever. But we must know that they will not be able to attain full fruition, not via Prophecy nor in the blessings He wishes to bestow upon us.

This is also the precise meaning of the following teaching in the Gemara (Yoma 85a):

Bloodshed defiles the Land and causes the Divine Presence to leave Israel.

For, as we stated above, the above-quoted verse is from a passage dealing specifically with the sins of bloodshed and murder.

In short: It is not the Shechinah (Divine Presence) that leaves the Nation, but rather the Shechinah’s revelation in the Land of Israel when the Nation is there. When the *Gilui Shechinah* leaves, the Nation is exiled.

■ Partial Punishment Only

In light of this introduction, we can return to Parashat Bechukotai, where we will see that G-d loves Israel, and that despite the strict demands of justice, He does not treat us the same negative way in which we sometimes relate to Him.

Let us consider the following verse:

וְהָאָרֶץ תִּעְזֹב מֵהֶם וְתִרְץ אֶת שַׁבְּתֹתֶיהָ בְּהִשָּׁמָה מֵהֶם וְהֵם יִרְצוּ אֶת עֲוֹנֵם,
יָעוּ וּבִיָּעוּ בְּמִשְׁפָּטֵי מֵאִסוּ וְאֶת חֻקֹּתַי גָּעְלוּ וְנָפְשׁוּ.

*The land will be abandoned by them,
and will enjoy its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them.
They will pay for their sins because they rejected My laws and
abhorred My decrees.* (Vayikra 26,43)

This verse describes Israel’s sinful attitude in two ways: *rejecting* and *abhorring* Hashem’s decrees. One might expect that G-d would respond in

kind and be disgusted and repelled by us. But no; the next verse uses the same root-words to tell us the opposite: לא מאסתים ולא געלתים, *I will not reject them and will not abhor them.*

In addition, the verse begins with the words *and even this* – meaning, despite the fact that they behaved that way, still, Hashem will neither tire of them nor feel disgust at them. Why? Because He loves Israel: “*I am the Lord their G-d.*” He will not violate His covenant with them, meaning that He will never replace His nation Israel with another people.

But at the same time, the verse provides a warning: Yes, He will not allow Israel to be destroyed, nor will He break His covenant with them, for His Great Name is called upon them. But there is also no promise to protect the nation in exile from the curses of the Torah! Hashem will help them survive, but not necessarily more than that. Accordingly, Israel’s ambitions in the Exile will also drop to the minimum, namely, how to simply survive among the nations of the world and not be obliterated.

This was precisely G-d’s promise to Yaakov Avinu after his brother Esav vowed to kill him and just before he left for Haran:

וְהִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי עֹמֵד וְשֹׁמְרֵתִיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ... כִּי לֹא אֶעְזֹבְךָ...
*I will be with you and protect you wherever you go...
 for I will not abandon you... (B'reshit 28,15)*

Hashem promises Yaakov no more than protection from total destruction. And in fact, G-d did not intervene at all when Yaakov’s uncle Lavan tried to trick him – until the dramatic moment when Lavan sought to kill him, at which point Hashem stepped in to save Yaakov.

This insight gives us the answer to the questions with which we began: Why does the Torah go into such brutal detail when listing the curses and punishments? Why quash our spirits with all the gory details of each punishment?

The answer lies in this remarkable verse that we have been studying:

וְאִף גַּם זֹאת ... לֹא מְאֻסְתִּים וְלֹא גְעֻלְתִּים לְכַלְתֶּם,
 לְהַפִּיר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם, כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.
*Despite all this ... I will not become so disgusted or abhorrent
 of them that I would destroy them and violate My covenant
 with them, for I am Hashem their G-d. (26,44)*

The point is strongly emphasized: Despite all these terrible punishments that He may deliver upon them, G-d will not grow totally disgusted with Israel. Despite these dreadfully harsh curses, Hashem will never abhor them.

If we were to suddenly receive a punishment not listed in the Torah, we might think: “This is surely a sign that Hashem has abandoned us and our covenant with Him.” The Torah therefore lists all the worst punishments, as if to say: “There is a limit! Even if I have to do this to you, and this, and this – it does not mean that I have totally abandoned you or our covenant; on the contrary, I will punish you only that far, and no further!”

■ Upright

Let us now compare the blessings and curses in Bechukotai. The blessings open as follows:

אם בְּחֻקֹתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאֵת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם.

*If you walk in My statutes,
keep My commandments and perform them.* (Vayikra 26,3)

This corresponds with the opening verse of the curses:

וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֵת כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה.

*And if you do not hearken to Me and do not perform all these
commandments.* (verse 14)

Up to here, the blessings and verses take a parallel route – but we then come upon a passage that has no parallel in the blessings:

וְאִם בְּחֻקֹתַי תִּמְאָסוּ,
וְאִם אֵת מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּגְעַל וְנִפְשָׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי,
לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֵת בְּרִיתִי.

1. *If you despise My statutes,*
2. *and if you are disgusted by My laws,*
3. *not performing My commandments*
4. *and violating My covenant.* (verse 15)

Here we see that Israel’s behavior has gone to a true extreme, described in three stages: Revulsion; disgust to the point of lack of performance; and violation of the covenant – certainly a true low in wickedness. This repulsive behavior is a clear outgrowth of the intent to replace, Heaven forbid, the service of G-d with idol worship.

This is very similar to this verse from Jeremiah:

כִּי שָׁתִּימָם רָעוֹת עָשָׂה עַמִּי, אֶתִּי עֲזָבוּ מִקּוּר מַיִם חַיִּים
לְחַצְבֵי לָהֶם בְּאֵרוֹת בְּאֵרֹת נִשְׁבְּרִים, אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִכְלוּ הַמַּיִם.

My nation has committed two evils:

1. *They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters*
2. *and have hewn broken cisterns that can hold no water.* (Yirmiyahu 2,13)

These are the two levels of sins: The first is the passive neglect of the commandments, while the second is the active violation of the Torah by seeking substitutes. The first is parallel to the first two parts of the verse in Vayikra, and the second level corresponds to the last section of the verse in Vayikra.

For the first part – passive neglect – Hashem doles out punishment and curses as we saw above in the list of curses: “*The land will be abandoned by them*” (Vayikra 26,43). That is, the Land of Israel will respond to the sins and will vomit out the sinning nation, as is written: “*Lest the Land spew you out for having defiled it...*” (18,28) - the manifestation of the Bechukotai curses “*I will abhor you*” and “*I will render your cities waste.*” (26,30-31)

Again, this means that though Hashem will never grow disgusted to the point of destroying Israel or negating His covenant with them, the Land could spew them out, meaning that G-d’s countenance – the Land of Israel – will be hidden from the Nation of Israel.

We then turn to the second sin, that of having “*hewn broken cisterns,*” actively seeking out false gods: Though it is more severe, still and all, G-d will not respond in kind, and will not punish them “tit for tat.” They left Him, but He will not leave them; they chose other gods, but He will not choose another nation; they showed disgust with His commandments, but He will not show total disgust with them. The only punishment will be the continued disconnect between the Land and the Nation.

Our relationship with Hashem can thus be compared to a two-story building. The first floor is the strong base on which the top floor rests; it represents the deepest bonds between G-d and Israel that He will never break. The floor above it is that of the Land of Israel, with all its advantages, including economic blessing, military security, and ongoing prophetic links with Hashem – what we described above as *Gilui Shechinah*.

But the existence of this second floor is not absolute; it is conditional. If we follow G-d's laws and fulfill the Torah, we will merit the second floor, as alluded to by the use of a specific word at the end of the blessings:

... וְאוֹלַךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמָמוֹת.

... *I will bring you upright to the Land.* (Vayikra 26,13)

The word קוֹמָמוֹת, *upright*, is related to the word קוֹמָה, meaning “floor,” and is written in the double format, signifying “two floors” (see Tr. Sanhedrin, p. 100a). If we follow the Torah, we will deserve the second floor as well.

But if we are sinful, then the “curses” tell us:

... וְלֹא תִהְיֶה לָכֶם תְּקוּמָה לְפָנַי אִיְבִיכֶם.

... *You will not be able to rise before your enemies.* (verse 37)

Here too, the word תְּקוּמָה, referring to the ability to rise, is from the same root - but it is written in the singular, meaning there will be no second floor when we sin. Still and all, the first floor, our inherent connection with G-d, will last forever and will never be replaced. And why?

As verse 42 tells us, it is because of the merits of our Forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who dedicated their lives for this covenant. It is also in the merit of G-d's love for Israel, and for the sake of His great Name that is proclaimed upon them, as is written:

כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת ה' אֶתְכֶם וּמִשְׁמֵרוֹ אֵת הַשְּׁבָעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם...

*Because of G-d's love for you, and because He keeps the oath
He swore to your forefathers...* (D'varim 7,8)

