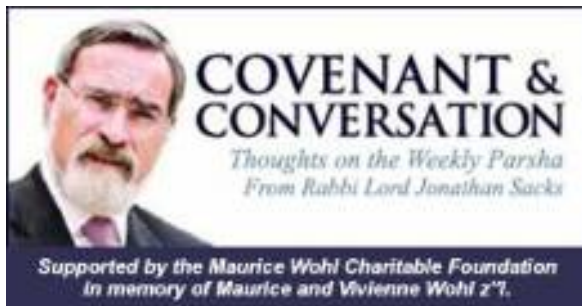


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On Leadership: The Fewest of All Peoples

Buried inconspicuously in this week's parsha is a short sentence with explosive potential, causing us to think again about the nature of Jewish history and the Jewish task in the present.

Moses had been reminding the new generation, the children of those who left Egypt, of the extraordinary story of which they are the heirs:

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as

you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut. 4: 32-34)

The Israelites had not yet crossed the Jordan. They had not yet begun their life as a sovereign nation in their own land. Yet Moses was sure, with a certainty that could only be prophetic, that they were a people like no other. What has happened to them was unique. They were and are a nation summoned to greatness.

Moses reminds them of the great revelation at Mount Sinai. He recalls the Ten Commandments. He delivers the most famous of all summaries of Jewish faith: "Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." He issues the most majestic of all commands: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Twice he tells the people to teach these things to their children. He gives them their eternal mission statement as a nation: "You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." (Deut. 7: 6)

Then he says this:

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples. (Deut. 7: 7)

The fewest of all peoples? What has happened to

all the promises of Bereishit, that Abraham's children would be numerous, uncountable, as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, and the grains of sand on a seashore? What of Moses' own statement at the beginning of Devarim: "The LORD your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Deut. 1: 10)?

The simple answer is this. The Israelites were indeed numerous *compared to what they once were*. Moses himself puts it this way in next week's parsha: "Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Deut. 10: 22). They were once a single family, Abraham, Sarah and their descendants, and now they have become a nation of twelve tribes.

But - and this is Moses' point here - compared to other nations, they were still small. "When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations-the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations *larger and stronger than you ...*" (7:1). In other words, not only were the Israelites smaller than the great empires of the ancient world. They were smaller even than the other nations in the region. Compared to their origins they had grown, but compared to their neighbours they remained tiny.

Moses then tells them what this means:

You may say to yourselves, "*These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?*" But do not be afraid of them; remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. (Deut. 7: 17-18)

Israel would be the smallest of the nations for a reason that goes to the very heart of its existence as a nation. They will show the world that *a people does not have to be large in order to be great*. It does not have to be numerous to defeat its enemies. Israel's unique history will show that, in the words of the prophet Zechariah (4:6), "'Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."

In itself, Israel would be witness to something greater than itself. As former Marxist philosopher Nicolay Berdyayev put it:

I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint . . . Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny.¹

Moses' statement has immense implications for Jewish identity. The proposition implicit throughout this year's Covenant and Conversation is that Jews have had an influence out of all proportion to their numbers because *we are all called on to be leaders, to take*

responsibility, to contribute, to make a difference to the lives of others, to bring the Divine presence into the world. Precisely because we are small, we are each summoned to greatness.

S. Y. Agnon, the great Hebrew writer, composed a prayer to accompany the Mourner's Kaddish. He noted that the children of Israel have always been few in number compared to other nations. He then said that when a king rules over a large population, he does not notice when one dies, for there are others to take his or her place. "But our King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He ... chose us, and not because we are a large nation, for we are one of the smallest of nations. We are few, and owing to the love with which He loves us, each one of us is, for Him, an entire legion. He does not have many replacements for us. If one of us is missing, Heaven forbend, then the King's forces are diminished, with the consequence that His kingdom is weakened, as it were. One of His legions is gone and His greatness is lessened. For this reason it is our custom to recite the Kaddish when a Jew dies."²

Margaret Mead once said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Gandhi said: "A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history." That must be our faith as Jews. We may be the fewest of all peoples but when we heed God's call, we have the ability, proven many times in our past, to mend and transform the world.

1. Nicolay Berdyayev, *The Meaning of History*, Transaction Publishers, 2005, 86.

2. Quoted in Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish*, London : Picador, 1998, 22-23.



Living in Israel

Devarim, 3:23-25: "And I implored God at that time, saying: 'My Lord, God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong Hand by which who is a god in Heaven who can do like Your deeds and Your might. May I please pass over and see the good land which is on the other side of the Yarden, this good mountain and the Levanon.'

Sotah, 14a: "Rav Simlai expounded, 'why did our Teacher, Moshe so desire to enter the Land of Israel – did he need to eat of its fruit or did he need to be satiated from its goodness. Rather, this is what Moshe said: 'Yisrael are commanded in many Mitzvot which can only be fulfilled in Eretz Yisrael. I will enter the land so that all the Mitzvot can be fulfilled through me...'

The parsha begins with Moshe recounting his desperate prayers to enter the Land of Israel. The Talmud explains that Moshe so desired to enter the land so that he could observe the Mitzvot that are unique to the land such as *terumot* and *maasrot* (tithes).¹ This seemingly

straightforward reason would actually seem to be a proof for one opinion among the early commentators in a dispute pertaining to the nature of the Mitzva to live in the Land of Israel.

The Mishna in Ketubot² teaches that if a husband wants to move to Israel, then his wife must come with him and if she does not, then the husband can divorce her without her receiving her Ketubah. Likewise, if the wife wants to come to Israel and the husband refuses, then the wife can request a divorce and receive the Ketubah. Based on this Mishna, it is clear that it is a very great thing to come to live in the Land of Israel. However, there is a major dispute as to why exactly it is so great.

The Ramban³ writes in a number of places that there is a Torah Commandment to live in Israel. He counts this as one of the 613 Commandments and clearly understands that there is a Mitzva in and of itself of living in the Land of Israel.⁴ However, another early commentator, the Tashbetz,⁵ disagrees and holds that the benefit of living in Eretz Yisrael is that one can perform the Mitzvot that can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel. He appears to hold that there is no intrinsic Mitzva of living in Israel for its own sake, rather the purpose of living in the Land is performing the Mitzvot that are unique to the Land. This opinion seems to be held by Rabbeinu Chaim cited by Tosefot⁶ who held that the Mitzva to live in Israel did not apply in his times because people were unable to observe the Mitzvot connected to the Land at that time.⁷

A number of commentaries note that the Talmud in Sotah appears to corroborate the opinion of the Tashbetz, because the Talmud explains that God understood that the reason Moshe wanted to come to Israel was because of the Mitzvot connected to the Land. According to the Ramban, why didn't the Gemara simply say that God understood that Moshe wanted to fulfil the mitzvah to live in Israel independent of the mitzvot connected to the Land?⁸

Many answers are given to this question, but two will be mentioned here.⁹ Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz explains that when the Talmud referred to the "many mitzvot which can only be fulfilled in Israel," it meant to include the mitzvah of living in Israel among them. Alternatively, the Kerem Yosef, based on Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik¹⁰ explains that everyone agrees that the purpose of the Mitzva of living in Israel is to be able to observe the mitzvot that are unique to the Land. Thus, when the Talmud referred to Moshe's desire to perform these Mitzvot, it implicitly meant that Moshe would also automatically fulfil the Mitzva of living in the Land.¹¹

There are varying approaches among the contemporary Authorities as to if there is an actual obligation to live in Israel¹², and needless to say there are many factors that can play a part in this question.¹³ Nonetheless, it is clear that all other things being equal, living in the Land of Israel should be the ultimate goal. In the words of Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, the idea of moving to Israel should be on the agenda of every Jew.

1. The Talmud continues that God understood that Moshe wanted the reward that comes with these Mitzvot and in response, God assured him that he would receive the reward as if he did the Mitzvot. The commentaries ask why Moshe

seemed to care so much about receiving reward, when the ultimate level of serving God is to serve without wanting reward. See Aggadot Maharsha, Sotah, 14a for one approach. A different question is discussed here.

2. Ketubot, 110b.
3. Ramban Al HaTorah, Bamdibar, 33:53; Sefer HaMitzvos, Hasagot Al HaRambam, Mitzva 4.
4. The Maharit (Chelek 2, Yoreh Deah, Simun 28) also appears to hold this way.
5. Shu"t Tashbetz, Chelek 3, Simun 200.
6. Tosefot, Kesubos, 110a, Dh: Hu omer.
7. There is a strong argument that nowadays the situation is very different from the time of Rabbeinu Chaim and it is perfectly possible to observe the Mitzvot connected to the Land, hence his argument no longer applies.
8. See Kerem Yosef, Sotah 14a who brings many answers to this question.
9. Both are cited in Kerem Yosef, ibid.
10. Kesavim, Simun 331, p.78.
11. It seems that not everyone agrees that this is the reason behind the Mitzva of the Land of Israel. Rather, it may be because of the intrinsic holiness of the land or the fact that there is greater Providence over the Land.
12. See Igrot Moshe, Even Ha'Ezer, Chelek 1, Simun 102 who holds that most early commentaries rule that it is not an obligatory Mitzva to live in the land of Israel. In contrast, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky was known to be very strong in encouraging people to live in Israel, and held that there is an obligation to do so (heard from Rabbi Aaron Pessin).
13. One obvious consideration is which place of residence would be the best for a person's Torah observance. In addition, involvement in great activities such as teaching Torah, outreach and so on may justify living in chutz l'aretz. Needless to say, one should consult with their Rav for advice in this area.



Double Sin, Double Comfort

They sinned doubly, as it says, "Jerusalem has sinned a sin." And they were stricken doubly, as it says, "She has received double for her sins." And she will be comforted doubly, as it says, "Be comforted, be

comforted, my people." (Yalkut Eichah 1118)

This Midrash can be understood in light of the comments of Ibn Ezra and Sforno on the concluding verses of our parsha:

"When your son will ask you in the future – What are the testimonies and statutes and judgments, which God our God has commanded you? – and you shall tell your son we were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt, and God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand ... and God commanded us to do all these statutes for our good all the days, to give us life as this day" (Deut. 6:20-24).

Ibn Ezra explains that the son's question is not what the mitzvot are, but why we were given a yoke different than all other peoples. The Torah's answer is that we must have trust that the mitzvot are for our own good, because God saved us from slavery by taking us out of Egypt. Sforno elaborates that while the benefit of mitzvot is predominantly in the World to Come, they also bring us life in this world.

God introduces Himself at the beginning of the Ten Commandments as the God Who *took us out of Egypt*, and not as the God Who *created heaven and earth*. This reminds us that just as the redemption from Egypt was for our benefit, so too, the mitzvot are for our good, and not for God's sake. Though, as the Sages say, mitzvot were not given to us to enjoy, but rather as a yoke around our necks; the purpose of that yoke is, in the final analysis, our good.

The Haggadah attributes the Torah's question here to the wise son. The answer given to him in the Haggadah is that we do not eat after the

Korban Pesach is all that is in our mouths at the moment of redemption. In the end, it is the benefit from mitzvot, such as eating the Korban Pesach, that remains with us.

FROM BEGINNING TO END

The Torah begins with God's loving kindness – His clothing Adam and Eve – and ends with His loving kindness – burying Moses. The entire foundation of Torah is *chesed* – God's total giving to those who serve Him. The Torah is, in its entirety, an expression of God's desire to do good for us. It is not an imposition on our life, but rather a framework within to earn eternal reward for our own good.

Delving deeper, Torah begins with the kindness of covering man's humiliation, his physical body. It gives us the means to utilize that body in God's service and thereby purify and elevate it. Moses was the culmination of this process of elevation to being God-like. He transformed his physical body into something so holy that only God could bury it and put it away until the resurrection of the dead. That is the very essence of Torah – to remove the shame of pure physicality by elevating the physical to Godliness.

When one sins, he actually commits a double crime: the first is rebellion against God; the second against himself in his disregard of the benefit from the mitzvah. Hence the punishment is also double. Not only does God punish him for his rebellion, just as a parent punishes a child to discipline him and guide him back to the right path. He also robs himself of the great benefit God so much desired to bestow upon him.

Consequently the comfort will also be double. The ultimate benefit will finally be realized, and, in addition, we will understand that the punishment itself was for our own good to prevent us from losing our eternal reward.



The Iron Furnace

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's parsha is always read on the Shabbat following Tisha B'Av. This Shabbat is known as "Shabbat Nachamu" (Shabbat of Consolation), based on the opening words of the Haftorah: "*Nachamu, nachamu, ami* - Be consoled, my nation (Isaiah 40:1). Shabbat Nachamu is intended to console us after the destruction of our Temple, since our Sages teach that if the Temple is not rebuilt in a given generation, it is as if the Temple were destroyed in that generation (Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma 1:1).

Since Parshat Va'etchanan always coincides with Shabbat Nachamu, it seems logical that some type of "comfort" is found within the parsha itself. What comforting words does it share with us?

In this week's parsha, God tells the Jewish people (Deut. 4:20), "I have taken you out of an iron furnace" (*kur ha-barzel*). The expression "*kur ha-barzel*" refers to the Egyptian exile. We

might wonder why the Torah describes Egypt with this particular phrase, when similar words could express the same idea. For example, a prophesy in the Book of Malachi (13:19) states, "Behold a day is coming, burning like an oven." It seems that the word "oven" would be an equally fitting description of Egypt. So why does this week's parsha specifically use the imagery of an iron furnace?

We can shed light on this issue by examining Rashi's commentary on our verse. Rashi defines the word "kur" (furnace) as "a vessel within which gold is purified." We could suggest that Rashi is not merely translating the word "kur," but is also explaining why we refer to the Egyptian exile as a "kur" (furnace) and not a "tanur" (oven). An oven is used for the everyday cooking and preparation of food. A furnace, on the other hand, has the specific function of refining gold. We can learn from here that God sent us into the Egyptian exile because He considers the Jewish people to be as precious as gold. No one bothers to refine ordinary rocks, because the result is worthless; however, people will expend great effort to refine gold, because we know that the outcome is valuable.

So too, God sent the Jewish people into the hottest of furnaces because He knew how valuable we would be when we emerged. God knew that the Jewish people would be molded by the process of exile and that, through that process, we could achieve extraordinary levels. Everyone knows that through adversity, greatness emerges.

This is how this week's parsha comforts us after the desolation of Tisha B'Av. As a nation, we

have certainly gone through many forms of "kur ha-barzel" during the two millennia since the destruction of the Holy Temple. Yet our experience in this "kur" is the surest indication that we are as precious as gold in God's eyes. Even as we yearn for redemption, we must realize that God will do whatever it takes to refine us, so that we can become as pure and as elevated as possible.

May we each recognize our intrinsic self-worth and utilize every golden opportunity to become all that we can be. In this way, may we merit the re-building of our Holy Temple in Jerusalem.



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