

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality From Rav Binny

(Portion of Bechukotai)

The famous 19th century blood libel in Russia, which came to be known as the 'Beilis Trial', became much more than the trial of just one man. Judaism as a whole stood accused, and its faithful defenders were forced to fend off repeated attacks while world Jewry rallied to their support.

*The judge challenged the defense. He said: "It says in your Talmud: You the people of Israel are called **Adam**, Man, yet the nations of the world are not called **Adam**.' What then do you consider the nations of the world to be, if not men?" demanded the prosecution. "Would you call them animals? "*

*The rabbi who was acting as the defense attorney explained: "In Hebrew there are two terms for man: **Ish** and **Adam**. Israel is called Adam because this term appears only in singular; there is no plural form for Adam. The Jews are described as the singular form of man because they are more than a mass of individuals. They alone, among the nations, are one. If a Jew on one side of the globe is in pain, a Jew thousands of miles away suffers with him. They are as limbs of one body.*

"Tell me", the rabbi continued, "if it were a Russian standing here accused of murder, would a Russian anywhere else on earth take an interest in his fate? Yet see how the Jews all over the world have come forward to help prove the innocence of their brother- for the Jewish people are one. The judge could not refute the truth. The explanation was accepted, and Beilis as well, was finally proven innocent. (From The Quill of the Heart)

This week's portion of *Bechukotai*, contains one of the most terrifying passages in the entire Torah. It describes what will happen to the Jewish people if they break the covenant they have accepted with G-d.

"If in spite of this you will not listen to me... then I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings... I will scatter you amongst the nations... your land will be laid waste... and for those who remain, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies, that the sound of a windblown leaf will cause them to flee; they will run as though fleeing from a sword, and they will fall, even though no one is even pursuing them..." (Vayikra (Leviticus) 26:28-36)

The verses in this chapter are so frightening and so painful that the custom even today is to read them in an undertone, as though we are afraid to say them out loud.

And these are more than just random words; the Jewish people, over the last three millennium has tragically encountered more than their share of the fulfillment of these frightening prophecies.

Indeed, it is beyond comprehension that after all the inordinate suffering the Jewish people has endured, we are still here. It is a wonder that we never gave up hope. Though some Jewish *individuals* understandably may have felt the Jewish story was over, the Jewish people themselves never gave up.

There is a strange comment hidden in the painful verses of *Bechukotai* that may allude to why that is.

The afore-mentioned verses continue:

"...they will stumble over each other as they would before a sword, even though no-one is chasing them; you will have no power to stand before your enemies." (ibid. v. 37)

Rashi here quotes the Midrash (*Sifra*) here that explains:

*“Do not read this as saying they will stumble **over** each other; rather it means they will stumble **because** of each other – because of each other’s iniquities.
This teaches that all Israel are responsible one for another.” (Kol Yisrael areivim zeh la’zeh”)*

One wonders why the rabbis would learn such a positive principle from such a negative source. Why would the most terrifying portion in the entire Torah teach us such a heartwarming imperative?

It is interesting to note that the verse begins by speaking about Jews in the third person: ‘they will stumble...’, but concludes in the first person: ‘you will have no power before your enemies...’

Why this change in syntax? Perhaps the transition from plural to individual tense is not random. In fact, this is not the only portion of the Torah full of terrifying curses and frightening prophecies predicting a terrible fate which awaits the Jewish people should they fail to live up to the covenant. The second is in Deuteronomy (*Devarim*) chap. 28. There too, the Torah tells us with frightening accuracy what will befall the Jewish people should we fail to live up to our ethical and moral mission.

Indeed, these are the only two texts in the Torah that speak of a time when the Jewish people will suffer exile and be scattered amongst their enemies, in a foreign land.

And yet, there are some fascinating differences between the two texts. Most notably, in Deuteronomy 28, it is Moshe who speaks to the Jewish people before they enter the land of Israel. He ends the chapter on a frighteningly despairing note:

“You will try to sell your selves as slaves... but none will buy you.” (Devarim 28:68) and he speaks in the singular form, to each individual.

Here in *Bechukotai* however, it is G-d who speaks to the Jewish people, he addresses them in the plural form, and the passage ends on a markedly hope-filled promise:

“But despite all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them nor despise them... I will remember the Covenant made with the first generation ...” (ibid. v. 44-45)

It is understandable that people in a society recognize that they are dependent upon each other. Obviously if everyone simply does what they like, without regard for their neighbors, then chaos will reign and ultimately society falls apart. If crime reigns, people are afraid to walk alone, and if there are no speeding limits and everyone drives as they like, no-one is safe.

What is remarkable is that the Jewish people maintained this social responsibility and caring one for another, even when we were scattered in every remote corner of the earth. We lived in different cultures, spoke different languages and even experienced different realities. While the Jews of Europe were suffering the horrors of the Crusades, the Jews in Spain were living in a golden age. And in modern times, when the Jews of Europe were being destroyed in the Holocaust, the Jews in America and England were experiencing unprecedented freedoms. Yet they never stopped caring one for another, and fighting for each others’ rights. They never gave up on each other.

This week’s portion of *Bechukotai* teaches us two things: it teaches us that we should never give up hope; itself a remarkable idea that only makes sense if there is meaning and purpose; if we are created for something greater than ourselves.

And it teaches us that it’s not just about the Jewish people; it’s about every individual Jew. Every single Jew matters; and it is if we stop caring for **every** Jew that we are really cursed, and it is because every Jew **matters** to every Jew, that we are truly blessed, even in exile; no matter the current circumstances.

In July of 2014, in the midst of Operation Cast Lead, which was then the latest battle in the War against Hamas, a text sent out to a few hundred friends went viral.

Max Steinberg, a lone soldier serving in Golani, had been killed along with six other soldiers of the elite Golani brigade, when Hamas attacked their armored personnel carrier in the Gaza strip. Because he was a lone soldier with no family in Israel, and most of his friends were in the army, there was a concern his parents who were flying in from Los Angeles, would be all alone over their son's fresh grave. The text asked anyone who might be able to get to the funeral to make it to Har Herzl, Israel's national military cemetery. Over thirty thousand of us showed up for the funeral that afternoon; all determined to make sure the Steinbergs knew that we were all part of the same family, and they would never be alone. And the entire country stopped, glued to their radios and televisions as they listened to the US Ambassador, Daniel Shapiro, speak of Max's dedication and bravery. Turning to Max's parents, he expressed in one sentence what we were all feeling: "your pain, is our pain".

Later, reading about who Max was, we learned that a day before his death, Max had a chance to call his parents as a tank he had been riding on was hit by another tank and the resulting accident meant all the soldiers were taken back out to the staging grounds outside Gaza to make sure they were medically OK. Max did not have to go back in, and told his parents he was still sore, but he insisted on returning to join his comrades as they all depended on each other....

I live in the small town of Efrat, in the mountains just south of Jerusalem. And we regularly attend a small synagogue on our block, which has a small ark. And in that small ark there is a small Torah scroll emblazoned with the colors of Golani, dedicated to Max Steinberg of blessed memory. And every time they take that little Torah scroll out, my heart skips a beat and I think of that day when a small guy with a huge heart brought an entire country together.



To quote Rabbi Sacks, z"l, in an interview some years ago on the BBC: *"We live in challenging times; we have become a society of individualists; we have forgotten that the team is bigger than the players, and the game is bigger than the team. Eventually a society made up of individualists results in chaos."*

Three thousand years ago, the Torah was making sure we always remember that we **all** matter because we **each** matter...

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman