

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ki Tavoh)

Chapter 28 in this week's portion of *Ki Tavoh* is one of the most difficult and harrowing chapters in the entire Torah.

Yet, along with chapter 30 of the book of Devarim (Deuteronomy) contained in the next week's portion of Nitzavim, it is actually one of the two chapters in the entire Torah, along with chapter 28 here in Devarim, that most speak to me personally.

To be sure, chapter 28 of the book of Devarim starts out well:

“And if you will hearken to the voice of Hashem your G-d, and do all of the mitzvoth...then all of these blessings shall come to pass... you will be blessed in the city, and blessed in the field... blessed in your coming and in your going...” (28:1-6)

For fourteen magnificent verses, the Torah speaks of all the good and blessings we will enjoy if we will only follow the recipe as laid out in the Torah and then, in verse fifteen, the Torah presents us with the frightening reverse side of the picture :

“And if you will not hearken to the voice of Hashem your G-d, and do all of the mitzvoth...then all of these curses shall come to pass... you will be cursed in the city, and cursed in the field... cursed in your coming and in your going...” (28:15-17)

And what follows are fifty-three of the most difficult and painful verses in the entire Torah. Indeed, so horrible are these ‘curses’ or ‘verses of reprove’ (*Tochacha*), as they are known, that the tradition is to read them in a lower tone in the Synagogue as if to signify our pain and horror at even hearing all the terrible predictions that they contain.

To me, and I stress here, *to me*, these verses chillingly speak of the terrible events of the Holocaust, more than any other period in Jewish history.

Interestingly, there is a very similar chapter of curses, predicting suffering and pain for the Jewish people, in the book of Leviticus (Vayikra), specifically, chapter 26 in the portion of *Bechukotai*. Both of these chapters are known as *Tochacha*, or ‘reproval’ and they are both terrifying.

Yet, there is a significant difference between them: *Bechukotai* speaks to the entire Jewish people as a whole; here in *Ki Tavoh*, the chapter is communicated in first person singular: we are being spoken to as individuals.

Read every year in the weeks preceding Rosh Hashanah we are being exhorted as individuals to heed carefully these terrifying words.

“Hashem will make you as a plague before your enemies...and you shall be as an embarrassment (or a horror) to all the kingdoms of the land.” (28:24-26)

From 1933 until 1940, Hitler (as outlined in Mein Kampf) was not at all intent on destroying the Jews; he simply wanted them out of Europe. But no one would take them.

In 1940, in Evian, the Europeans convened a conference to tackle the problem of refugees, which everyone understood was a euphemism for the Jews. Incredibly, not one single country present, including the United States, offered to reduce its quota by even one single additional refugee.

Each country had a different reason for refusing to allow even a single Jew to enter their borders, but the most incredible response, (contained in the minutes of the meeting on display at Yad Vashem, Israel’s national Holocaust Museum) came from Australia.

*“We have no anti-Semitism in our country”, claimed the Australian representative,
“And if we allow Jews in, we will be encouraging the spread of anti-Semitism.”*

Sixty years ago, we were an embarrassment to the entire world, which preferred to pretend we weren’t even there.

“And your carcasses shall be food for the birds and the beasts, and no-one will even tremble.” (28:26)

One of the most powerful photos to come out of the Warsaw ghetto, is a photograph of a couple, walking down the street amidst throngs of passerby, sharing a moment amidst the destruction and deprivation of the ghetto.

What is chillingly apparent from a closer look at the faces of all the people in the streets, is that no-one even takes notice of the bodies strewn about the streets and being loaded into a wheelbarrow.

“And you shall grope around in the noonday sun, as a blind man gropes in the darkness, and you shall not find your way, and you shall be oppressed and robbed every day, and none will save you.” (28:29)

The verse here does not seem to make sense. What difference does it make to a blind person whether he is groping around in light or darkness? Perhaps the difference is that when he stumbles in the darkness, he also knows that no one else sees his struggle, and so no one will come to his aid. During the nightmare of the Holocaust we were screaming and stumbling in broad daylight, but no one wanted to see....

“And you will become mad from the sights which your eyes shall see.” (28:34)

*Eli Weisel, in his book **Night**, tells of the day he arrived on the platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau, not long before his bar Mitzvah.*

The Jews starved and exhausted were made to stand in their first selection, and none other than the angel of death himself, Josef Mengele, awaited them at the front of the long line. Although the Nazis tried to camouflage what they were really doing, it didn't take a genius to figure it out. All the young and strong and healthy looking men and women were going one way, and all the old and sick and small children were going the other way. You knew which line you had to get on.

A few people ahead of Eli Weisel, was a woman with two small boys, and as she reached the head of the line, Mengele stared at her with his evil sneer. He said nothing, merely grinning and pointing with one finger in each direction. But she didn't understand, so he screamed at her "Ein!" (One). And she still didn't get it, so he screamed again, all the while with that horrible smile, "You choose...."

The woman, finally understanding what he was asking her to do, began screaming, and went mad on the spot. And so they carted all three of them off to their deaths.

And on and on, and on....

"Sons and daughters will you bear, but they will not be for you for they shall be enslaved. (28:41)

And the stranger in your midst shall rise up higher and higher above you and you shall be forced lower and lower..." (28:43)

In the camps, the non-Jewish criminals became the kapos and guards and thus the masters over the Jews who were at the lowest strata of life.

"And you shall serve your enemies... in hunger and thirst, naked, and with nothing left." (28:45)

"And G-d shall lift over you a nation from afar... as the eagle flies, a nation whose tongue you cannot hear (and understand)" (28: 49)

As the German troops, emblazoned with the golden eagle, the symbol of Nazi Germany, swept through Europe and deep into Russia, Jews who never imagined the Holocaust ever reaching them were caught completely by surprise....

A brazen nation who will show no favor to the aged, nor grace to the young..." (28: 50)

"And he will lay siege to your gates until the mightiest and highest of your walls and fortresses come crashing down ..." (28: 52)

All of the faith that was placed in the Maginot line of France disappeared in a single afternoon in early 1940....

"And G-d will scatter you amongst all the nations, until the ends of the earth." (28:64)

After the war, Jews spent years traveling the world to countries as far off as Cuba and Venezuela, the Siberian North, all over Europe and Africa and of course America and Canada, in search of family members scattered throughout the world....

“In the morning you will say ‘when will the night come’, and in the night you will say ‘when will the morning come, from the fear in your heart and the things that your eyes will see.’” (28:67)

To me, this chapter, in all of its pain and horror, speaks of the Holocaust. It is all of the questions we can never fathom, let alone answer, and all of the pain and horror, which can become part of life and which we are perhaps not meant to understand.

If this was the end of the story, it would be tremendously disheartening, leaving us empty and barren, with no direction, much as the Jewish people were, for the most part, in the shadows of the gas chambers in 1945.

But there is a conclusion; a partner to this terrible chapter in the Torah, and for that matter in Jewish history, and that is chapter 30 of Devarim, in next week’s portion, *Nitzavim*.

“And it shall come to pass, when all of these things shall come upon you... and you shall return to your hearts amongst all the nations of the world wherein G-d has scattered you.

“And G-d will return your remnant, and gather you in from amongst all the nations where you have been scattered.

“If your remnant shall at the ends of the heavens, even from there will G-d gather you in; even from there will He take you in.

“And G-d will bring you back to the land that your ancestors inherited, and will do good and make you greater even than your ancestors...” (30: 1-6)

If chapter 28 of the book of Devarim seems to speak of the Holocaust, then chapter 30 is all about the birth of the State of Israel.

There will come a time, says the Torah, when we will finally come home. After two thousand years of dreaming, the time will finally come to rebuild.

For two thousand years, ever since the Romans put torch to the temple, we have dreamed of coming back.

At every Jewish wedding, and at every Jewish funeral, after every meal, and three times a day in our prayers, at the height of our greatest joy, and in the depths of our greatest tragedies, we have never stopped dreaming of Jerusalem and the land of Israel.

Seventy years ago, in one of the greatest experiments in the history of the world, a people that had never given up, began their incredible return. From South America and Eastern Europe, from darkest Africa, and the land down under, Jews speaking just about every language on the face of the earth began making their way back.

And the first line of next week’s portion suggests both the challenge, and the solution:

“Atem Nitzavim HaYom Kulchem...”

“You are, all of you, standing here today.” (29:9)

There is a difference between being *be'amidah* and being '*nitzav*', though both are words which refer to standing up.

La'amod, means to stand, and refers to being upright as opposed to sitting or being downtrodden.

But to be *nitzav*, relates to the root of *yatziv*, to be stable. It is not just about your body being upright; it is about what you are standing on. It is to recognize that we are standing here, in the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, on four thousand years of Jewish history. And it is the type of standing which can only come as a result of being ***Kulchem...*** “***All of you***”. All of us; together.

The single greatest response we can give to those who once again rise up to destroy us, is to be ‘gathered in’ to be together, firm in who we are, and in what we have to share with the world.

This year, as we face the challenges that lie ahead, may Hashem bless us with the strength and the wisdom to become re-connected once again with the dream of who we are and who we can be, all of us, together, at long last, in the land of Israel.

Best wishes for a sweet, happy, and healthy year,

Shabbat shalom,

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