

I have divided this sermon into three parts. First, I will very briefly summarize the Book of Leviticus by paraphrasing the introduction to Rabbi Jacob Milgrom's three volume work on Leviticus. Rabbi Milgrom is considered a world authority on Leviticus.

The second part is the main focus of my address and is devoted to a thorough discussion of the last chapter of Leviticus entitled Bechukotai which literally means "by my decrees or statutes."

The third or last segment of the sermon are three very brief presentations by non-Jews on the concept of Jewish people or Judaism as eternal.

I have read multiple commentaries by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, brief commentaries by members of the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary including Arnold Eisen and Matthew Berkowitz who is based at The Schoken Institute in Jerusalem.

The 3rd book of the Torah contains a meticulous and often tedious list of rules and regulations of the Levites or priests. The Book opens with the people of God camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai after being delivered from slavery in Egypt. The glory of the Lord has filled the wilderness tabernacle and now God tells Moses to teach the people and priests concerning sacrifices, offerings, feasts, celebrations, and the Holy Days.

Thus the Book of Leviticus is best explained as a guidebook for instructing people about Holy living and worship. Everything from sexual conduct to the handling of food, to instructions of worship and celebrations, is covered in detail in the Book of Leviticus. This is because all aspects of our lives - moral, physical, and spiritual - are important to God.

The title of the Book of Leviticus comes from the ancient Greek which names the book Leueitikow which means "the Book of the Levites." The book refers to the Levites in ministering as priests, worship leaders, and teachers of morality.

The central message is that God, who is holy, requires his people to be holy.

Throughout the book of Leviticus, the Israelites were camped at Mt. Sinai. God had just delivered them from slavery and taken them out of Egypt. Now He was preparing to take Egypt (slavery and sin) out of them.

The three significant themes of the Book of Leviticus are:

- 1.) The Holiness of God
- 2.) The way to deal with sin
- 3.) Worship

This brief summary of the Book of Leviticus paraphrases some of the introduction to Rabbi Jacob Milgrom's introduction to his 3 volume books on Leviticus.

Now I will focus on the last *parasha* of Leviticus entitled Bechukotai.

The last chapter of the Book of Leviticus is one of the most fascinating, difficult chapters of the entire book of Leviticus but its outcome and its values, its purpose and its conclusions are remarkable. I hope to convey this message to you that walking in God's path results in goodness, mercy, kindness, peace and justice. Not walking in God's path produces chaos, hatred and destruction. That is the message I wish to leave with you this morning.

The book of Leviticus ends with one of the most terrifying passages in literature. It describes what will happen to the Israelites if, having made their covenant with God, they break its terms. "If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile you, and I myself will punish for your sins 7 times over. 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 lay waste the land so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins. As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them." (Leviticus 26:28-36).

To this day, we read the passage, traditionally known as the Tochachah, "the admonition", *sotto voce*, which means a soft voice, so fearful is it and so difficult to internalize and imagine. It is all the more fearful given what we know of later Jewish history.

Tragically, more than once, it came true. The Jewish people has had more than its share of sufferings and persecutions. Its commitment to the terms of the covenant, to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation", was and still is anything but safe, an easy option, a low-risk strategy. Of the people God claimed as his own, God is demanding. When Israel does His will they are lifted to great heights. When they do not, they are plunged into great depths. The way of holiness is supremely challenging.

But yet, at the very climax of this long list of curses, there comes a passage surpassing in its assurance: "but when the time finally comes that their stubborn spirit is humbled, I will forgive their sin. I will remember my covenant with Jacob as well as my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. Thus, even when they are in their enemies' land, I will not reject them or spurn them, bringing them to an end and breaking my covenant with them because I am the Lord their God." (Leviticus 26: 41-44).

To summarize this quotation from the Tochacha, if Israel stays faithful to God they will be blessed. But if they are faithless, the results will be defeat, destruction, and despair. The rhetoric is relentless, the warning unmistakable, the vision terrifying; yet, at the very end comes these utterly unexpected lines: "And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will, for their sake, remember the covenant of their ancestors whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 26: 44-45).

The people may be faithless to God, but God will never be faithless to the people. He may punish them but He will not abandon them. He may judge them harshly, but He will not forget their ancestors, who followed Him, nor will He break the covenant He made with them. God does not break His promises, even if we break ours.

As Rabbi Sacks says, "A central theme of the Torah and of Tanakh as a whole is the rejection of rejection. God rejects humanity, saving only Noah, when he sees the world of violence. Yet, after the flood He vows 'never again will I curse the ground because of humans even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done.' Genesis 8:21. That is the first rejection of rejection."

Then comes the series of sibling rivalries. That covenant passes through Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau. But God hears Hagar's and Ishmael's tears. Implicitly, he hears Esau's also, for he later commands "do not hate an Edomite, that is, a descendant of Esau, because he is your brother." (Deuteronomy 23:7)

As Rabbi Sacks again says, even when Israel suffers exile and finds themselves in the land of their enemies, they are still the children of God's covenant, which He will not break because God does not abandon His people. They may be faithless to Him, but He will not be faithless to them.

Christians may use the term "The Old Testament" when referring to the Jewish Bible, but the Old Testament is not old. God's covenant with the Jewish people is still alive, still strong.

The people of the eternal God will itself be eternal. There is in the Mosaic books no greater promise than this. It is repeated in the prophetic literature by the man often thought of as the most pessimistic of the prophets—Jeremiah. Jeremiah spent much of his career as a prophet warning the people of impending disaster. It was an unpopular message. And he was imprisoned and nearly killed for it, yet he too in the midst of his gloom told the Jewish people that they would never be destroyed. From Jeremiah 31:35-36 come these words. "This is what the Lord says: He who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea that its waves roar: The Lord Almighty is his name. Only if these decrees vanish from my sight declares the Lord, will the descendants of Israel cease to be a nation before Me."

I would like to conclude this sermon with proclamations from three outstanding non-Jewish scholars elaborating on the eternal nature of the Jewish people.

First from Blaise Pascal, the great Christian theologian and mathematician. He wrote in the 17th century speaking to Louis XIV. "It is certain that in certain parts of the world, we see a peculiar people, separated from the other peoples of the world and this is called the Jewish people. This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has lasted

for a singularly long time. For as the people of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens, and Rome and others who came so much later have perished so long ago, these Jewish people still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried 100 times to wipe them out, as historians testify, and as can easily be judged by the natural order of things after such a long spell of years. They have always been preserved, however, and their preservation was foretold. My encounter with this people amazes me."

In 1899, Mark Twain, an atheist, who could not help but be overwhelmed by this remarkable truth, wrote: "The Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded into dream-stuff and passed away. The Greeks and the Romans followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone. Other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in the twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age. No weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass but the Jew remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

And finally, the writer Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, best known for his book, *War and Peace*, was not an agnostic. He was a devout member of the Russian Orthodox church. In 1891 he wrote an article entitled "What is a Jew?" He wrote "The Jew is the emblem of Eternity. He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy; he whom neither fire nor sword nor Inquisition was able to wipe off from the face of the earth, he who has been for so long the Guardian of Prophecy, and who has transmitted it to the rest of the world. Such a People cannot be destroyed. The Jew is everlasting as is eternity itself."

Notice how often the non-Jew looks at the Jew as eternal.

Somehow, in spite of the brutal attempts throughout history to destroy the Children of Israel from the Crusades, Inquisitions, and Pogroms, to the Final Solution of the Holocaust, Jews have defied all predictions of their demise.

There is pain in this history. At times it was written in tears, yet it remains astonishing. The curses of the Tochacha came true, but so did the consolation. No nation was attacked so often. None attracted so much irrational hostility. Empire after empire pronounced their destruction, yet, they have vanished into oblivion while the people of Israel still lives, vulnerable, sometimes fractious and rebellious, yet still there, defying all the natural laws that govern the history of nations. There is a mystery here as Pascal so clearly saw. Yet its basic formulation is clear. Despite all the odds, it came true: the people of the eternal God became the people of eternity.

Shabbat Shalom