

Parshat Nitzavim/Vayelech 5780

As we approach the end of our yearly cycle of Torah reading, it is a good opportunity to look back at the Torah as a whole and see if we can find an overarching theme. In fact, Rabbi Menachem Leibtag in his essay “Can Man Return to Gan Eden?” (Torah MiEtzion- Devarim pages 361-370) notes linguistic parallels between the beginning of Bereishit and the end of Devarim.

For example, if we go back to the beginning of Bereishit, the pessukim describing Gan Eden state- *“And G-d brought forth from the ground every tree.....and the Etz HaHayyim (the Tree of Life) in the middle of the garden, and the Etz HaDa’at tov vara (the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil).....and from the Etz HaDa’at tov vara do not eat, for on the day you eat from it- mot tamut- you shall surely die.”* (Bereishit 2:8-9, 15-17)

Compare the language used in this passage to two sections from this week’s sedra- *“See, I set before you today hayyim (life) and tov (prosperity), mavet (death) and ra (adversity).”* (Devarim 30:15)

“I call Heaven and Earth to testify that I am presenting you the choice of hayyim (life) and mavet (death)- the beracha (blessing) or kelala (curse)- and you should choose hayyim (life) in order that you live..... on this land that I promised to your ancestors.” (Devarim 30:19-20).

Rabbi Leibtag notes that the keywords in the passage describing Gan Eden and the two quoted from this week’s sedra are “hayyim” and “mavet”. “Hayyim” is equated with “beracha” and “mavet” with “kelala”. In addition, the third source quoted (Devarim 30:19), calls upon heaven and earth (shamayim va’aretz) to testify.

This not only brings back recollections of the first verse of Bereishit (“In the beginning G-d created the heaven and earth (shamayim va’aretz)”- Bereishit 1:1) but also the beginning of the Gan Eden narrative which reads- *“These are the chronicles of heaven and earth (shamayim va’aretz).”* (Bereishit 2:4).

Rabbi Leibtag suggests a reason for this parallel, “the Garden of Eden narrative described a special environment between man and G-d, with an emphasis on reward and punishment.....In a very similar manner, the Tokheha [curses which were given in last week’s sedra] describe a parallel reality in the land of Israel; should Bnei Yisrael keep the mitzvot, G-d will reward them with prosperity (see Devarim 29:1-14); if they sin, G-d will punish them severely (see Devarim 29:15-26).”

Rabbi Leibtag develops his theme further by pointing out that when man was expelled from Gan Eden, the Keruvim were placed at the east of the Garden - *“He (G-d) drove away the man and stationed the Keruvim at the east of Eden, along with the revolving sword blade, to guard the path of the Tree of Life.”* (Bereishit 3:24)

We come across the Keruvim again when the Aron is built as a home for the Luchot which Moshe Rabbeinu received on Mount Sinai- see Shmot 25:18-20.

Rabbi Leibtag notes that, “just as the Keruvim of the Garden of Eden protect the path of the Tree of Life so do the Keruvim of the Temple guard the path to true life: i.e., they protect the Aron which contains the Luchot- the symbol of the Torah and our covenant with G-d at Mount Sinai.”

Rabbi Leibtag concludes his essay by stating that, “G-d’s original intention may have been for man to enjoy a close relationship with Him in the Garden of Eden. Even though the goal seems to have failed in Bereishit, Devarim concluded with the possibility that the nation of Israel can indeed return to such an existence in the land of Israel [by observing the laws of the Torah].”

We can therefore argue that there is an overarching theme to the five books of the Chumash. Bereishit began with mankind being tasked to live an idealistic life on condition that they keep G-d’s commandment. By the end of Devarim, that type of existence is available to the Jewish People in the Land of Israel.