

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai 5777

The Tochacha and Shmittah

In the second of this week's Sedras, we read the Tochacha. It is a detailed passage of 'rebuke' that explains the consequences of rejecting G-d and failing to live up to our obligations as the chosen people.

Interestingly, less detail is given to what particular acts would illicit such an outcome. To be exiled from our homeland, and be met with the depth of potential retribution that the Tochacha states, one might assume that murder, idolatry, adultery, and other major prohibitions would be the cause of such a catastrophic result.

However there is one specific law whose violation is mentioned explicitly in relation to the Tochacha, and also alluded to in the way the Tochacha is structured. *"Then the land will be appeased for its sabbaticals... the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals"* (chapt 26:34). Chazal understand this passuk to mean that our exile results directly from Bnei Yisrael's failure to observe the commandment of Shmittah. How can this remote mitzvah, occurring only once in every seven years, be the one upon which hinges our right to remain in the land of Israel?

The centrality of the non-observance of Shmittah as a cause of the punishments mentioned in the Tochacha is perhaps also alluded to in the way the Tochacha describes the process of sin and retribution and the use of the number seven in doing so. We can learn from the first two pesukim of the Tochacha that there are seven steps in the chain reaction of sinning which eventually lead to the denial of the existence of G-d. You will:

- 1) Not dedicate yourselves to learning Torah
- 2) Eventually stop doing Mitzvos
- 3) Be shunned by others who are devoted to Torah
- 4) Hate the Rabbis who teach the Torah
- 5) Prevent others from being observant and growing
- 6) Deny the Divine origin of the mitzvos
- 7) Deny the existence of G-d

Furthermore, the Tochaha states that the punishment for transgressing each of the levels of sin is seven-fold, 'sheva al chatoseichem', and meted out measure for measure. Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in Aznaim LaTorah, makes two interesting observations regarding the seven levels of sin and punishment.

Firstly, he questions why the blessings for faithful observance are not similarly structured with seven increasing rewards. He explains that by arranging the steps of man's downfall with corresponding punishments, the Torah is warning us that as soon as we recognize the first step of spiritual decline we must correct our behavior, as otherwise we will descend to the next level and be met with its associated punishment. Brachos, on the other hand, if formula based, whereby doing x will give you y, would only lead to haughtiness with the belief that righteousness is a foregone conclusion by merely following a defined process.

Rav Sorotzkin also highlights a fascinating omission. The seven levels of sin listed out in the Torah are actually only met by six sets of punishments with the seventh level of sin - denying G-d's existence not met with any punishment. For this stage to have a 'measure for measure' punishment, it could only be G-d annulling his covenant with us, which we know G-d will never do. But the question remains, why is Shmittah singled out?

Shmittah has three main commandments; to not work the land in the 7th year; any produce grown in the 7th year is hefker and cannot be stored away for the future; and all loans are cancelled. The unifying principle of these three commandments is trust - the food and money we possess going into the seventh year is exactly what we require, no more no less. Keeping Shmittah is the ultimate statement of our trust and emunah in G-d's promise to protect us. Although we aren't normally told to rely on miracles, Shmittah is one of the few places where the Torah commands us to rely on G-d to sustain us in a somewhat miraculous fashion, as the crop from the 6th year will be sufficient for three years.

Not working on the land and trusting that G-d will provide, is the ultimate demonstration of faith in His existence. It is perhaps for this reason that the non-observance of Shmittah would bring our downfall and exile from Israel. This would be a lack of observance in the commandment that best demonstrates the fundamental principle of our relationship with G-d, and any relationship for that matter. It is one of trust and belief that G-d will protect us and provide for us exactly what we need and when we need it.