

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Tavo
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Tavo – What can we make of all these curses?

This week's Parasha of Ki Tavo contains the tochachah – a long and frightening list of curses that will befall the Jewish people if they breach the Torah. It is not easy reading. We already had another list of curses back in Parashat Bechukotai. How can we respond to these curses? Why are we given two separate lists of curses? And why are the two lists so different?

The Ramban, in his commentary to the Torah, explains why we were given two separate lists of curses. The two predictions differ because they refer to two different historical periods. The tochachah in Bechukotai was an accurate prediction of the destruction of the first Bet Hamikdash by the Babylonians and the first exile. The tochachah in our Parasha is an accurate description of the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash by the Romans and the second exile. If we examine the lists of curses closely, we will see that they have come true with chilling accuracy. The Torah predicted the history of the Jewish people to the last detail. Only a Divine Author is capable of such an astounding feat.

Let's examine some of the pasukim in more detail, with the help of Ramban's commentary and Rabbi Dovid Sapirman.¹

Towards the end of the tochachah, the Torah makes some startling and counter-intuitive predictions:

Hashem will scatter you from one end of the earth to other end of the earth (Devarim 28:64)

You will remain small in population (Devarim 28:62)

It doesn't make sense that a nation who would be conquered and dispersed around the entire world and remain small in number would continue to exist. It is unprecedented. Yet that is precisely what has happened to the Jewish people. We have always been small in number and dispersed throughout the world. But we continue to exist.

You will worship there other gods that you and your forefathers never knew, wood and stone (Devarim 28:64).

Why does the Torah refer to wood and stone? Rabbi Sapirman explains that this refers to the two great powers that have persecuted the Jewish people over the current long galut – Christianity (whose symbol is the wooden cross) and Islam (whose symbol is the stone at Mecca). Many Jews have been lost due to the work of missionaries or the pressure of governments, both Christian and Islam. This is only relevant to the second destruction, and that is why this verse appears in our Parasha rather than the first tochachah in Parashat Bechukotai.

Hashem will lift up over you a nation from far away, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you will not understand. (Devarim 28:49).

This pasuk predicts three things – the conqueror will come afar, the connection to an eagle, and the foreign language. All of these predictions only apply to destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash. The Romans, who destroyed the second Bet Hamikdash, came from far away. (The Babylonians, who destroyed the first Bet Hamikdash came from the same region in which Israel was located.) The symbol of the Roman legion was the eagle. A soldier in each Roman legion had the dedicated job of carrying a standard with an image of the eagle. (This was not applicable to the Babylonians.) The Jews did not speak Latin, the language of Rome. (In contrast, the Jewish people were very familiar with Aramaic, the language of their Babylonian oppressors at the time of the first destruction.)

Hashem will take you and your king that you will put upon you to a nation that you and your forefathers did not know. (Devarim 28:36)

The Ramban explains that King Agrippas went to Rome towards the end of the second Bet Hamikdash period and this led to the destruction, as the pasuk predicts. The verse uses unusual language to describe king Agrippas: “The king that

¹ The following analysis of the Ramban was based on Chapter 11 of “Emunah – A refresher course” by Rabbi Dovid Sapirman, Mosaica Press. I highly recommend this book – it delivers exactly what it promises: a step-by-step program to increased emunah.

you will appoint” rather than “The king that will reign over you”. The Torah is hinting that King Agrippas was not fit to reign because he was descended from a slave, and his appointment was against the law.²

The Ramban highlights a number of distinctions between the tochachah given in Bechukotai and the tochachah in our Parasha and explains how they relate perfectly to each of the two destructions. Here is a high-level summary of some of these points:

Tochachah in Bechukotai – The first destruction	Tochachah in Ki Tavo – The second destruction
Hashem speaks in first person because the Shechinah was present in the first Bet Hamikdash	Moshe says the curses because the Shechinah was not present in the second Bet Hamikdash.
It does not describe servitude in our land before the exile	It describes servitude in our land before the exile – which is what happened before the second destruction
It refers to a fixed time for the exile corresponding to the number of shemittah years that were not observed	No set time is given, rather redemption depends on teshuvah
There is no reference to the ingathering of exiles and no complete teshuvah	There will be complete redemption and full teshuvah
It does not mention an enemy from far away – since Bavel was close to the land of Israel	It mentions an enemy coming from far away – i.e., Rome
It mentions that the Jews will be scattered but not throughout the world	It mentions that the Jews will be scattered from one end of the world to the other
There is no mention of slave boats	There is mention of slave boats – Titus filled boats with Jewish slaves to send to slave markets.
It mentions the sin of avodah zara	There is no mention of avodah zara – since the second destruction took place after the Men of the Great Assembly had prayed to Hashem to remove the yetzer hara for idol worship.

It is difficult to read such distressing predictions for our people. However, we can keep in mind the following:

- After the long list of curses, we are told that eventually everything will be okay in the end. We have to wait until next week’s Parasha of Nitzavim, but the guarantee is clearly stated - see Devarim 30:1-6.
- The actuality of these predictions depends on our behaviour. The pasuk which introduces the long list of curses states: “And it will be **if you do not obey** Hashem your G-d, to observe to fulfil all His commandments and statutes which I am commanding you this day, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.”³ It is all in our hands! If we do teshuva and behave the way that we should then Hashem will not need to send us these curses!

There is a very well-known passage in the Gemara at the end of masechet Makkot. Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues were near the Temple Mount after the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash and they saw a fox emerge from the site of the Kodesh Hakedoshim. The other Rabbis started weeping when they saw the holiest site in the world being desecrated. But Rabbi Akiva was laughing. He explained that there are prophecies of destruction, but there are also prophecies of redemption. Since they were witnessing the prophecies of destruction being fulfilled, they could be sure that the prophecies of redemption will also be fulfilled. His colleagues replied: “Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva you have comforted us”.

Yes, it is true, the curses that we read in this week’s Parasha have been fulfilled. But just as these negative predictions came true, so too will the beautiful prophecies of the future redemption.⁴ That’s the promising message that we can take with us as we struggle with another wave of Corona, more lockdowns, and the real possibility that many of us will once again not celebrate the Yamim Noraim in our shuls.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember that all of the curses listed in the tochachah are conditional. We have the power to stop the curses by doing teshuva and behaving the way we should.
2. Remember that Hashem has promised that ultimately, we will be redeemed. In the end, everything will be OK. And that’s a promise from Hashem so it’s guaranteed to come true.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

² See Sotah 41b which refers to the fact that Agrippas was not qualified to be king and an incident where the nation tried to gloss over his flaw and placate him.

³ Devarim 28:15

⁴ There are many examples in Tanach, for example the later chapters of sefer Yeshayahu.