

# MESHECH CHOCHMAH

## Parshas Bechukosai

### Exile and Destiny

וְאִם גַּם זֹאת בְּהִיּוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם לֹא מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא גַעְלִתִּים לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם

*But despite all this, while they will be in the land of their enemies, I will not have despised them or rejected them to annihilate them, to annul My covenant with them, for I am Hashem their God. (26:44)*

This pasuk forms part of the concluding words of the section in this week's parsha known as the *Tochachah*, the Torah's warnings of retribution if the Jewish People do not remain faithful to the Torah and its mitzvos. If we look closely at this pasuk we will notice that of the four terms of retribution contained therein, the first two negate things that Hashem states He will not do: "לֹא מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא גַעְלִתִּים – I **will not** have despised them or rejected them," while the second two terms serve to negate specific outcomes or purposes, "לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם – to annihilate them, to annul My covenant with them." The implication is that these two things may indeed happen, but they will not happen for the reasons stated at the end of the pasuk.

What does this pasuk come to teach us about the experiences of the Jewish People in exile? If they do not occur for the reasons stated at the end of the pasuk, why *do* they occur?

#### **THE CYCLE OF EXILE**

The Meshech Chochmah explains. If we survey the history of our exile, we can perceive a pattern. The Jewish People arrive at a certain country as refugees, they band together and establish communities, developing themselves both in temporal and spiritual spheres. This leads them to a feeling that they fully belong to that host country, at which point winds of hostility begin to blow, erupting into a storm which forces them out of that country in search of safer shores. The upheaval of exile brings about a decline in terms of their physical, financial and political stability, as well as in spiritual stature, so that when they arrive at their new location they need to start from the beginning in all of these areas – whereupon the cycle begins anew. What is the meaning of this cycle and what goal does it serve?

Hashem has embedded in human nature the drive for each generation to advance newer

ideas than the one which preceded it. In the temporal realm, this leads to advances in areas of technology, commerce etc. In the spiritual realm, the positive effects of this attitude are predominantly felt, and its value primarily realized, when the Jewish People are in the land of Israel. There, the sanctity of the land enables Torah sages to join together, forming the Sanhedrin which acts with full authority to enact measures to develop and safeguard Torah living appropriate to that generation. Additionally, the spirit of prophecy and Divine inspiration which prevails in the Beis Hamikdash helps inform and guide any legislative innovation towards bringing the Jewish People closer to Hashem and to His Torah – not further away.

When the Jewish People are in exile, all of this changes. Without the abovementioned conditions in place, new enactments are no longer vouchsafed their positive value, and their positive effect is not assured. With this expression of “newness” essentially off-limits, each new generation will seek a different outlet through which to introduce ideas that did not exist in the previous one. When they first arrive in a country, spiritually and financially depleted, this creativity will have ample scope for positive expression, taking the form of establishing new communities and infrastructures, including religious ones.

However, once these institutions are in place, subsequent generations will seek to develop newer ideas still. This may then take the form of rejecting the existing notions and values of their parents and adopting what are for them “new” ideas – those of the surrounding culture. In rejecting their parents’ ideas, they will forsake their own heritage and will seek to insinuate themselves into the host culture.

At this point, their very identity as a nation is in jeopardy. But Hashem’s eternal covenant with His people and the exalted role with which He has endowed them in world history will not allow for their dissolution. Hence, at this stage, winds of exile being to blow, uprooting the Jewish people to yet more distant lands, where they begin again.

Of course, none of this needs to happen, and certainly not indefinitely. The Jewish people can merit redemption at any time and return to the setting where their creativity will be put to its most potent and positive effect. However, as long as they are in exile, this cycle will accompany them.

### **A NEW ROAD TO A FAMILIAR PLACE**

The tragedy of these events repeating themselves is that the younger generation, in its infatuation with the prevailing host culture – which is “new” to them – lose sight of the fact that such an attitude precipitated earlier exiles. They are sure that *these* “new” ideas are different. Addressing himself to the situation in his own time, the Meshech Chochmah comments:

*The Jew forgets his roots and sees himself as a natural citizen [of the host population]. He forsakes the study of his own religion in order to study foreign languages... he thinks that Berlin is Jerusalem,<sup>1</sup> learning [moreover] from the corrupt among his neighbors, not even from the upright among them...*

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<sup>1</sup> These words are probably the most well-known and oft-quoted from the Meshech Chochmah, who passed away in 1927. Although the reference to “calling Berlin Jerusalem” assumed horrifying significance in the years that followed, Rav Copperman in his commentary nonetheless insists that it is wrong – and even misrepresentative – to refer to this section as “the Meshech Chochmah on the Holocaust.” To do so would serve to tie these comments exclusively to the

*Then, a stormy and tempestuous wind will blow, uprooting him and placing him among a distant nation whose language he has not learned. There, he will know that he stranger, that his [true] language is our holy tongue, while other languages are of passing value for him. He will know that his roots are those of the People of Israel, his consolation lies in the comforting words of the prophets of Hashem, who prophesied concerning the scion of Yishai [the Mashiach] in the End of Days...*

*There [in his new land] he will find some respite, he will be aroused by a holy spirit and his children will add further vigor, disseminating in these new borders the Torah which had been forgotten... This is the way of the Jewish people from the day they began their wanderings.*

### **THE MISSION STATEMENT OF EXILE**

Returning to our pasuk, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the *Tochachah* concludes by explaining the purpose of these experiences. The term “מאסתיים – despised them” refers to the spiritual decline which accompanies the upheaval of being exiled from one place to another, while term “געלתיים – rejected them” refers to the exile itself. This pasuk emphasizes that the goal and purpose of both these experiences is not “לכלתם אתם להפר בריתי אתם – to annihilate them, to annul My covenant with them.” Rather, the purpose is as stated in the concluding words of the pasuk, “כי אני ה' אלקיהם – because I am Hashem their God.” The covenant between the Jewish People and Hashem – as well as their historic mission representing Him in this world – are too important for them to be allowed simply to dissolve into surrounding cultures. Accordingly, the pasuk states that even in the most trying and turbulent episodes of our exile, the eye is on maintaining our unique connection with Hashem and moving us forward towards our ultimate destiny as His People.

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Holocaust and hence be to miss his broader message which relates to the totality of the Jewish exile, both beforehand and afterwards. In the Meshech Chochmah's time, the place which most vividly reflected this part of the exile cycle was Berlin. Has he lived in later years, he would have named other places, perhaps more familiar to us and closer to our own experience.