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Parshat HaShavua sheet

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from around the Internet*

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Parshat Bechukotai

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A SEPARATE PEACE

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

“If you will walk in my statutes, and heed my commandments ...” (Leviticus 33:3).

This week the Torah bestows its promise of blessing and peace to those who follow in the path of Torah. Rashi is bothered by the seeming redundancy of walking in statutes, and heeding commands. He explains that “walk in my statutes” refers to arduous Torah study, and “heed my commandments” refers to keeping the mitzvos.

And then there is peace. Hashem promises that if we adhere to the directives, “I will bring peace to the land” (ibid v. 6). In the same verse, the Torah also tells us that “a sword will not pass through your land.” If there is peace, then obviously a sword will not pass through. What is the meaning of the redundancy? Once again, Rashi explains that the “sword passing through” is referring to a sword that is not directed against our people; rather it is a sword that is passing through on the way to another country. Thus the two types of peace.

But maybe there is a different type of peace; one that does not refer to guns and ammunition, but rather to a peace that is on another level.

Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein of B'nei Berak tells the story of Rav Eliezer Shach, the Ponovezer Rosh Yeshiva, of blessed memory. Rav Shach once entered a shul and sat down in a seat towards the back, and, while waiting for the minyan to begin, Rav Shach began to study Torah. Suddenly a man approached him, hands on his hips, and began shouting at him: “Don’t you know that you are sitting in my seat?” the irate man yelled. “Who are you to come here and just sit down, without asking anyone permission?”

Rav Shach quickly stood up and embraced the man. He hugged him lovingly as he begged the man for forgiveness. He agreed to the irate man’s every point. “I am so sorry for taking your seat even if it was for a few moments,” he pleaded. Please forgive me. I must have absent-mindedly sat down there. Please forgive me.

The man was taken aback at the Rosh Yeshiva’s humility, and immediately apologized for his rude behavior. “After the davening, students of Rav Shach approached him and asked why he so readily accepted blame and begged forgiveness for what surely was not a misdeed. After all, why should he not be able to sit down in the seat. Rav Shach explained, “If Torah is all that one aspires to have, then everything else in this world, all the items one would normally squabble about has no significance. When one is immersed in Torah, a seat is meaningless, a place is meaningless. Surely a material object is not worth getting upset over, surely no less are they worth fighting over. Why shouldn’t I apologize?”

The Torah tells us a secret to peace in our community. If we toil in Torah, there will be peace in the land. The Torah is telling us that if we immerse ourselves in Torah then all the temporal objects that are the fulcrum of most fights are meaningless.

We think of peace as a concept that occurs between nations. However, we often forget that what we need is peace within our own community. A separate peace.

The Walk of Life

By Sheldon Stern

In 1978, an English group called Dire Straits, led by a Jew; Mark Knopfler, released its eponymously named album. One of the hits was entitled, "Walk of Life." If the name sounds familiar, it's because that song has been used as the background music for various medication ads. If we were to rename this week's Parsha, "Walk of Life" wouldn't be a bad choice.

The Parsha begins by reminding us, "Im Bichukosai Taleichu" if you walk in My statutes, you'll be duly rewarded. Rashi tells us that the verse refers to Limmud Torah. This, however, is problematic. Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel (Avos 1:17) tells us that actions i.e. Mitzvos, speak louder than words(of Torah.) MBJC/Shtieble has much to recommend, not the least of which is Rabbi Aaron Finklestein's Halacha shiur on Shabbos mornings. Years ago, I attended a shul where the rabbi spoke for a few minutes between Mincha and Maariv on weekdays. He'd pick a subject, say Sefiras Haomer, and teach the Halachos in a dry, perfunctory manner. There was never any interaction e.g. questions from the congregants. In contrast, Rav Aaron makes whatever he discusses come alive. Everyone is encouraged to participate and they do. It's said that sometimes people would ask Rav Moshe a "klutz kasha." The Gaon would rephrase the question and then add, "This is what so and so meant to ask." Rabbi Finkelstein, I believe, was Michavin to the Gadol Hador. Torah, must, at all times be enjoyable, but even more important, it must "walk" with us. I can tell, by the smiling faces at the end of the class, that the material was absorbed, and it traveled with the attendees. But that doesn't seem to answer the question from the Mishna in Avos. Seemingly the other Rabbi's approach is more effective in presenting actual Halacha. Many of us think that Judaism is about buying a nice Lulav and Esrog etc, but Chazal clearly state that it's the Mitzvos Bein Adam Leadam that are of paramount importance. Yes, you have to know what to do if you're unsure whether or not you said Yaale Veyovo on Rosh Chodesh, but that pales when compared to the care one must take not to hurt one's feelings. Developing such sensitivity doesn't come from memorizing laws by rote, rather it comes from walking and thinking in Torah. Rabbi Finkelstein's goal is to produce Torah minds. We see then that learning leads to proper behavior. I think that the following Moshol will bring this point across. The human body has a central and autonomic nervous system. The former, governed by the brain, controls thoughtful actions, while the latter is largely responsible for automatic functions(this is an oversimplification as there is much crossover.) Your mind will decide how much you will eat, exercise and the like. This is very important, but at the same time, your heart, lungs kidneys, and numerous other organs are working on automatic pilot. There's no question, then, that it's the autonomic system that keeps us alive. And the same applies to Torah. Yes, we decide which shul to attend, and where to shop for kosher food, but that's not the Ikkar of the religion. Many years ago I was at my old Yeshiva. On this occasion, I came with a friend from Brighton. The Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Friedman, during his customary Mussar Shmuess, made the following remark, "Let's say a Jew, even a frum Jew, insults you, what should you do? You should immediately respond with Chesed, and you should know that the insult is a great favor for you in so many ways." My friend was silent, but when we left he told me he was never coming back. He thought Rabbi Friedman was crazy because if someone did him harm in any way, he'd destroy that person. I knew it would be a Brocho Levatala to offer a Torah perspective and we just went our different ways. But I'd like to share another story about this fellow. One Shabbos we were at the same shul in Brighton. He asked the Rabbi, who was a great Talmid Chacham, the proper way to hold the cup of wine when making Kiddush. The Rabbi had a bemused look on his face as if to say, "Do you have nothing more earthshattering to ask?" Consider the famous story in the Gemara(Sanhedrin 102B). Rav Ashi was writing about the fiend, Menashe, and he referred to him as a colleague. Menashe came to the redactor of the Gemara in a dream and gave him a piece of his mind. "What nerve do you have calling me your colleague? You don't even know the correct way to slice a Challah." Most people who learn this, think of Menashe as the ultimate hypocrite. With all his sins, he's bragging about something so insignificant. But that's not Pshat. People will commit heinous acts, and then laud themselves as pious because they're Makpid on Cholov Yisrael. It's these attitudes that Rabbi Finkelstein is attacking, and he's succeeding, producing Jews who walk with the Torah at all times.

But there's another aspect to the Torah traveling with us. I used to take long, Shabbos walks with my father. I always had a song(or ten) playing in my head. I met a fellow named Bob Meditz in college(not Jewish.) He was a huge fan of another British band, "Yes." He told me to buy their album "Relayer." Its second side has just one song, "Gates of Delirium." and it's 28 minutes long. I guess Hashem was sending me a message. If one spends(wastes) 28 minutes of his life listening to a bunch of rockers maybe he needs to have his head examined. My old yeshiva, which I referenced above, was hard-core right-wing. The Hashkafah was that everyone must exorcise all his previous secular interests. I disagree, but the Torah must predominate. Therefore, when I walk to and from Manhattan Beach on Shabbosim, I compose, in my head, the Dvar Torah for the upcoming week.

Last Sunday was Lag B'Omer and I learned something else about the Torah walk of life at the Manhattan Beach barbecue. Baruch Hashem Rabbi Eisenstadt truly loves and accepts everyone as they are. There's no pressure to conform to some dogmatic concept of what a Jew should look like or how he should think and behave. Jews of all stripes

intermingled and it was totally organic. Dr. Reich was speaking to one of the senior members of the MBJC. I was at the same table, listening to their conversation with one ear while learning with the rest of my senses. After about 15 minutes, Dr. Reich took his leave. This fellow looked at me and asked, "What are you studying?" I told him, "Berachos." He responded, "That's beautiful my friend." The two of us had never exchanged words before, but that's the power of the Torah. It's a song all its own and it's truly the "Walk of Life."

Beyond Rebuke

By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

My cholesterol is sky high, the boss is unhappy with my performance, my wife thinks our marriage is a mess and now the lousy car broke down. For G-d's sake, why does everything happen to me? Do I deserve this? Am I really such a terrible person?

Sound familiar? As a rabbi, I have certainly heard this and similar questions asked many times over the years. Implicit in the question is the assumption that any suffering or misfortune that befalls us must be some form of divine retribution; surely, it must be a punishment from G-d. But if I'm such a good guy why then should I deserve such punishment? And, if on top of that, we also believe that G-d is good, then this is really too mind-boggling for a mere mortal like me to work out.

So what if I told you that divine punishment is only one of many possible scenarios to explain your predicament? There are a great many possible explanations and interpretations for human suffering. In fact, it might not be a punishment at all. So don't be in such a hurry to make all these assumptions.

The Torah reading of *Bechukotai* (Leviticus 26:3-27:34) includes a section known as the Rebuke. It is an ominous warning of the troubles that will befall Israel should we stray from the G-dly path. The mystics teach that even those frightening punishments are, in reality, hidden blessings that cannot be perceived at face value.

I remember hearing an interesting analogy on this theme from the well-known author Rabbi Dr. A.J. Twerski:

A mother takes her toddler to the doctor. The doctor prepares to give the child a vaccination by injection. The kid isn't stupid. He sees trouble coming, so he doesn't make it easy for the doctor. In fact, mom must hold the child down while the doctor administers the injection, and throughout, the kid is screaming and shouting. Not a minute later the child is suddenly burying his face in mom's shoulder, desperately seeking solace in his mother's embrace. And the question is why? Was mom not an accomplice to the crime when she held him down while the doctor attacked him? Why is this child suddenly finding comfort on mom's shoulder? She is the enemy!

The answer is that every child knows intuitively that his mother loves him and wants only the best for her child. Even if there seems to be a momentary lapse, he knows it will be short-lived. After the fleeting test of faith, the innate and essential bond of love between mother and child is quickly re-established.

And so it is with our Father in Heaven. Sometimes we may feel angry; it seems as if he has joined forces with Satan. Why does He allow all these terrible misfortunes to befall us? And yet, we know that he really and truly does love us. After all is said and done, we are His children. Does the mother in the clinic hate her child? Is she punishing him? G-d forbid. Does the doctor want to hurt the child? Of course not. So, just as a child is comforted by his mother, so is the Jew comforted by the knowledge and conviction that G-d loves us.

To us it may remain a mystery but to G-d there is a cosmic, eternal plan. The child doesn't understand or appreciate an injection and neither can we fathom the divine "vaccinations" we must put up with from time to time. Nevertheless, we accept in good faith that somehow there is a reason - and even a good reason - behind all our problems. It may not be revealed to us in this world, only in the next. So we do need a fair amount of patience. Personally, I'm prepared to handle living in suspense.

In our moments of misery and days of distress, let us remember that our loving Father in Heaven is surely no less caring than the mother in the doctor's rooms.

“If you will go in My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them”(26:3)

The Or HaChayim has 42 explanations of this posuk. In one of them, he notes that the parsha does not begin by saying “if you learn my decrees” but “if you go in my decrees.” This teaches us that the Torah must accompany one wherever he goes. Every action that one takes, regardless of the surroundings, must be viewed through the lens of Torah and mitzvos. The posuk in Mishlei says: “Bechol derochecho da’eihu,” “know Him in all your ways.” Everything that we do must be with the intention of furthering our service of Hashem. One must go everywhere with Hashem’s decrees. There is an entire Siman in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 231) that is devoted to how one should go through the day with all of his activities dedicated to the service of Hashem. Even the seemingly mundane facets of our life can be raised to a higher, spiritual level if they are approached with the proper mindset. Our religion is not limited to the synagogue or to the home. The Torah encompasses our entire life and everything that we do must be with the Torah in mind.

“You will chase your foes, and they will fall by the sword to you” (26:7)

Rashi says that the enemies will fall by the swords of their own companions. Sifsei Chachamim elaborates that the Torah does not say “you will strike down your enemies.” It says that “they will fall by the sword,” indicated that the Jewish people will have no part in felling the enemies. It would seem that Hashem wants us to clearly see His hand in the downfall of our foes. The blessing promised here is that we will not have any reason to take credit for ourselves or to chalk up our successes to our own strength. The downfall of our enemies will come directly from Hashem so that we will have no choice but to attribute our salvation to Him alone. The inescapability of this conclusion is a blessing in itself. Without it, we must make a concerted effort to see Hashem’s guidance in every Jewish victory, which can be difficult to see when He hides His involvement. Though our forces make the effort when fighting a war, we must recognize at the same time that Hashem is the “Ish Milchama,” the ultimate warrior who determines our success when we battle with our enemies.

“And I will place My dwelling in your midst, and My spirit will not reject you” (26:11)

In the list of blessings, Hashem promises that “My spirit will not reject you.” What kind of backhanded blessing is this? R’ Moshe Feinstein suggests that sometimes a person could do mitzvos but still deserve punishment. When a person does mitzvos by rote without any feeling, Hashem is not happy because the person’s heart is not in it. As Chazal teach us, “Hashem wants the heart.” It is important to strike a balance between regular performance of the mitzvos while still investing our heart and soul into them every day. We mention this in Birchos Hashachar when we say **במצוותיך ודבקנו בתורתך ותרגילנו**, “accustom us to your laws and make us attached to your commandments.” When we find this balance and do the mitzvos properly, we will earn the blessings in this parsha. Hashem will not be upset with us, even though the potential for Hashem’s dissatisfaction still remains when performing mitzvos. R’ Feinstein suggests a second approach based on the following Midrash in Rus: “If Boaz had known that Hashem was going to record that he gave Rus roasted kernels of grain, he would have instead given her fattened calves.” Sometimes people are satisfied with doing just a little bit even though they have the ability to do much more. Hashem rejects this approach. Hashem says that he will be satisfied and will bless us when we will do the mitzvos to the best of our abilities, constantly seeking to do more and building on previous successes. Another lesson from this Midrash is that people fail to realize the greatness of what they do when they perform a mitzvah and that all our actions are being recorded. This recognition would spur a person to do so much more because he would value his own efforts.

“I will lay your cities in ruin and I will make your sanctuaries desolate; I will not savor your satisfying aromas” (26:31)

In Megillah 28a, Chazal teach that the sanctity of the Bais HaMikdash remains intact even when it is no longer there. Rabbeinu Bachya cites a Midrash on Tehillim which states that the Divine Presence will always remain at the site of the Bais HaMikdash even when it is desolate. The Midrash also cites a posuk which teaches that the Divine Presence will never move away from the western wall of the Har HaBayis, what we know today as the Kotel. The Rambam codifies this as halacha (Hilchos Bais HaBechira 6:17), as it impacts whether one may visit the Har HaBayis while in a state of impurity when the Bais HaMikdash is not there. In fact, R’ Ovadia Yosef writes that his opinion is to forbid ascending to the Temple Mount today based on this Rambam (Yechave Da’as 1:35). The Midrash on Shir HaShirim compares the Jewish people to a dove. Just as a dove returns to his nest even after it has been destroyed, so too Jews come back to Eretz Yisrael even though the Bais HaMikdash is still absent. Regardless of the existence of the Bais HaMikdash, we still feel connected to its location because we know that the sanctity has never left it.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

The Connection between Israel and the Jewish People

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Vayikra, 26:32: “And I will make the land desolate, and your enemies who dwell on it will be desolate.”

Rashi, 26:33: Dh: VehashimoTi: “This is a good measure for Israel, that the enemies will not find satisfaction from their land, in that it will be desolate for its dwellers.”

Ramban 26:16: Dh: V’eileh: And that which it says, ‘the land will be desolate for your enemies is a good tiding and teaches that in all of the Exiles, our land will not receive our enemies. And this is a great proof and promise for us, that you will not find anywhere a land that is as good and open...and it is now as desolate as it is, because from when we left, It does not accept and nation or language, and they all try to settle in it and they do not succeed.’”

The devastating curses are outlined in this week’s Torah Portion. In the midst of these curses, the Torah relates that the land will remain desolate while our enemies inhabit it. On superficial analysis, one may think this is also a bad thing, yet the Sages point out that this is actually positive. Rashi and the Ramban both cite sources making this point, and the Ramban notes that this is a proof of clear Divine Providence in that the land is incredibly fertile when the Jewish people inhabit it, but totally desolate when they are in Exile.

Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch elaborates on this point and notes that throughout the centuries, the non-Jewish nations have fought for the land, but none were able to successfully cultivate it. He adds that this is a great proof to the truth of the Torah, that this prediction was made thousands of years ago, and it came true.

Indeed, Aish HaTorah have a class called the ‘Seven Wonders of Jewish History’², and one of the wonders is the interdependence between Eretz Yisrael and the Jewish people. They point out that Eretz Yisrael was part of the area known as the Fertile Crescent because of its fertility. Yet, as soon as the Jewish people leave the land, it becomes a desert and none of the many nations that have inhabited it have succeeded in cultivating it. The degree to which this is the case is demonstrated by an account written by the famous author, Mark Twain, when he visited the land in 1867.

"We traversed some miles of the desolate country, whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds, as silent, mournful expanse. A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Tavor safely. [Tavor is in the north, in the Galilee, the most fertile part of the land.] We never saw a human being on the whole route. We pressed on towards the goal..., renowned Jerusalem. The further we went, the hotter the sun got, the more rocky and bare, repulsive and dreary the landscape became. There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country. No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bound the approaches to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is mournful, dreary and lifeless. I would not desire to live there."³

Taking this idea even further, the Mei Daat⁴ notes that around the same time as Mark Twain, expert English agriculturalists analyzed the actual ground of Eretz Yisrael and concluded that it impossible to grow anything on it, except perhaps potatoes. Imagine how they would have reacted had they seen the land several decades later and how only the Jewish people manage to successfully grow all kinds of produce from it, and at the same time, the areas owned by non-Jews in Eretz Yisrael remain barren.

In the Aish HaTorah class, they note the phenomenon and rhetorically ask:

“Has this ever happened anywhere else in the world? The white men came to this country and took it over from the American Indians. It had amber waves of grain. Did the land suddenly become a desert? Of course not! It doesn't make a difference who's living in the land. If a land is fertile, it's fertile; if it's a desert, it's a desert.”

When we discuss ‘proofs’ of the veracity of the Torah, this idea is often overlooked, but there are really two aspects to why it is so powerful – the obvious one is the fact that this never happened anywhere else, but the second is the fact that the Torah itself predicted it. Only a Divinely-written document could so confidently make such a bold prediction that, if proven wrong, would disprove Its veracity. In addition to the proof aspect of this phenomenon, it should also strengthen the Emunah in all believers in that it clearly demonstrates God’s Providence over us and our relationship to the land.

Realities of Life

By Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha which concludes the book of Vayikra deals with the realities of Jewish national and personal life. On one hand it describes in rapturous terms the blessings of happiness, security and serenity that can happen to the Jewish people and to the individual Jew. But on the other hand it vividly and graphically describes death, exile, troubles and tragedy.

Jewish history bears out the accuracy of both visions. We have lived through both experiences. Jewish history seems to have contained much longer periods of darkness than of light, of more tragedy than of joy and serenity. Though the Torah assigns observance of the commandments as the prime cause of security in Jewish life and non-observance of the same as the cause of tragedy, history and the great commentators to Torah seem to modify this cut and dried axiom.

God's wisdom and judgments are inscrutable and are beyond even elementary comprehension by us mortals. As such we are left wondering as to the tragedies that descended upon the Jewish people and that continue to plague us today. Though there are those amongst us that are prepared to give and accept glib answers to the causes of tragedy, the wise men of Israel warned us against such an approach. Observance of commandments is enormously difficult to fulfill completely and accurately.

As such it is difficult to measure the "why" part of this week's parsha. It is sufficient to note the "how it happened" part to realize that its message of contrasting periods of serenity and tragedy has been painstakingly accurate and contains not one word of hyperbole. The destruction of the Temples, the Crusades and pogroms, the Inquisition and the Holocaust are all graphically described in this week's parsha. Such is the prophetic power of the Torah.

In personal life, the longer one lives the more likely tragedy will somehow visit them. The Torah makes provision for this eventuality in its laws of mourning. We all hope for lives of goodness, pleasantness and secure serenity. Yet almost inexorably problems, disappointments and even tragedy intrudes on our condition.

In Vayikra, the death of the sons of Aharon remains the prime example of tragedy suddenly destroying a scene of pride, satisfaction and seeming accomplishment. In this week's parsha the description of the punishment of Israel for its backsliding comes after a background of blessings and security. The past century presented the Jewish people with horrors of unimaginable intensity and of millennial accomplishments. The situation of extreme flux in our national life has continued throughout the sixty years of the existence of the State of Israel.

The unexpected and sudden, but apparently regular change of circumstances in national Jewish life mirrors the same situation so recognizable to us from our personal lives. We are constantly blindsided by untoward and tragic events. So, the jarring contrast that the two main subjects of the parsha present to us are really a candid description of life and its omnipresent contradictions, surprises and difficulties. Though we pray regularly for health and serenity, we must always be cognizant of how precarious situations truly are. Thus, as we rise to hear the conclusion of the book of Vayikra we recite the mantra of "chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek" - let us be doubly strong and strengthen others! So may it be.