

Parshat Ki Tavo 5775

This week's Sedra describes the two very different events in Jewish life that have been present throughout our long history as a people. One is when we will inhabit and control our own land – the Land of Israel. That is clearly indicated in the opening words of this week's Sedra – Ki Tavo – when you will come into your land. The second painful event set out in this week's Sedra is the Tochachah, which means, “remonstration” namely the bitter, lengthy and detailed description of the sufferings that will befall the Jewish people if they fail to honour their mission as the people of G-d. The Tochecha appear twice in the Torah – once in the Sedra of Bechukotai, the second in this week's Sedra; we lein them quickly and quietly so that they are hardly audible (and sometimes indecipherable!).

Why does the Torah include the Tochecha? The explicit descriptions set out in the Tochecha raise issues as to why the Torah set out such a harsh and unforgiving picture of the Jewish future? The fact that the description of much of the calamitous events related in the Tochecha is – to quote Rabbi Berel Wein -an expert on Jewish History - a “ completely accurate, prophecy fulfilled to the nth degree”, reinforces the question. The reason for these descriptions to be set out is to reassure, namely, just as the calamities to befall the Jewish people have literally come true, so the blessings and redemption told to us in the this week's Sedra shall also be fulfilled. Some of them - to again quote Rabbi Wein- “have already been realized in our time with the ingathering of the exiles of Israel to the nascent Jewish state....”.

The seven Haftorot of comfort and consolation from Tisha B'Av to Rosh Hashanna Yom Kippur and Succot all reaffirm the prediction of G-d's mercy and redemption towards the B'Nai Israel. G-d does not allow us to be vanquished physically or spiritually. "Will a woman forget her infant? So too, will I not forsake you," states the Prophet Yeshayahu. Rabbi Akiva, upon witnessing the ruins of the Temple taught that just as it was apparent that the painful predictions regarding the state of the holy of holies had come true, so too the blessings foretold for the Jewish people and their redemption also would be fulfilled

The differences between the two Tochachot of the Sedra of Bechukotai and Ki Tavo The first in Bechukotai is the reported speech of G-d, the second in Ki Tavo is

the direct speech of Moshe. The first is directed to the whole of the B'Nai Yisrael: it uses the second person plural. The second is addressed to individuals: it speaks in the singular. The first ends on a note of consolation: despite the bad things that will happen, G-d will not abandon the Jewish people. He will remember his covenant with their ancestors. The Jewish people will survive. The second ends bleakly with no consolation. According to Ramban- Nachmanides, the first Tochachah refers to events surrounding the destruction of the First Beit Hamikdosh, whereas the second is about the Second Beit Hamikdosh and the sufferings of Jews under the Romans.

The message of the Tochecha of KiTavo Rabbi Sacks points out a further difference – and states that “here one can only be awestruck at the reach of Moshe's prophetic vision”. In Bechukotai, G-d had spoken of a fundamental breach between the B'nai Yisrael and G-d. The language is harsh: “if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws”, “if you continue to be hostile to me.” What is at stake is an active rebellion of the B'Nai Yisrael against G-d. In Ki Tavo, the language is different. It does not speak of a willful, petulant nation deliberately spurning G-d. It speaks of something that hardly sounds like a sin. Why would B'Nai Yisrael suffer? “Because you did not serve G-d your Lord with joy and gladness in the midst of the abundance of all”. Moshe reached the climax of the message he gave in his speeches to the B'nai Yisrael which are set out in the book of Devarim. ‘For forty years you and your parents wandered in the desert. They were hard times, years without a home, when only by a series of divine miracles did you have anything to eat or drink. Now you have reached the brink of the Promised Land – Eretz Yisrael- you think this will be the end of all your challenges. But it will not be; to the contrary, this is where the challenge commences – and it will be the hardest of all because it will not look like a challenge. ‘When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase, when all you have is multiplied – it is then you must beware lest your heart becomes proud and you forget G-d your Lord who brought you out of Egypt and the land of slavery.’ Rabbi Sacks states that from the Tochecha in this week's Sedra we learn that “The greatest challenge is not slavery but freedom; not poverty but affluence; not danger but security; not homelessness but home. The paradox is that when we have most to thank G-d for, that is when we are in greatest danger of not thanking – or even thinking of – G-d at all”.