

Nitzavim: The End of the Tochecha

- Nisson Shulman.

The second Tochecha ends as hopefully as the first, except that the ending is delayed till the next parsha, Nitzavim, dealing with Teshuva, and then all the promises of Hashem will come true. Ramban's interpretation of two tochechos referring to the two churbanot.

Nitzavim-Vayelech: The End of the Tochecha

[Can be used as a sermon or shiur. For a sermon select those parts which are pertinent to your message. It can be made into a Teshuva shiur.]

1. Last week we read the Tochecha, the great admonishment to our people. It is written twice in the Torah. Once in the name of G-d, once Moses himself prophesies what will happen to us if we disobey the laws G-d gave us.

2. But there is one stark difference. The first time Tochecha is given in the Torah it ends with hope and promise. The second time it seems hopeless, with no redeeming quality! The Torah portion last week ended with a downer! The Tochecha ends with the dire prophecy that "I shall exile you once again to Egypt in ships, to that very place where I had promised you will not see it again, and there you will be sold to your enemies as slaves, in such numbers that none will buy" (28:68).

3. How do we explain this? Do we agree with those who say Moses was being harsher with our people than the Almighty Himself? I can't accept that. He who was ready to give himself up to death rather than allow his beloved people to perish; the shepherd Moses of the flock of our people; He who would not let the Lord go, so to speak, until he won forgiveness for our people – he would not end his admonishment in hopelessness!

4. But when you consider the portion of today, Nitzavim, you realize that Moses was no less hopeful than when the first Tochecha was given. For the Tochecha in Ki Tavo doesn't end with the end of that portion. It continues with today's Sidrah.

5. Moshe closed last week's Tochecha with a temporary pause, with the words "These are the words of the Covenant that God commanded Moshe to make with the children of Israel, besides the Covenant at Sinai" (28:69). For the conclusion of this Covenant Moses waited until he had once again convened all the people (29:1-11) declaring that the purpose of this gathering is to cause the people to pass into the Covenant that G-d makes with you today. And the Tochecha continues with the words, "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, amongst all the land of your exile; And you shall return to the Lord your G-d and heed His voice in all I command you this day, you and your children with all your heart and soul; Then G-d will also return to you, returning your exiles, have mercy upon you, and gather you from all the nations where you were scattered by Him. If your exiles were to the ends of the earth, G-d will return you to the land your fathers inherited, and you will inherit it and be more blessed and more numerous even than they. And G-d will circumcise your heart and your children's hearts,

so that you will love him with all your heart and soul, so that you live. And all these curses will be placed upon your enemies who had persecuted you..." (30:1-7).

6. In this way the Torah posits the great and awesome power of Teshuvah, of change, and based on this the great promise that has its climax in the last portions of the Torah and Moses' song. For more than any other book of the Torah Devarim is one long speech, and Moses is the speaker. And the ending is one of hope and promise as we would expect from Moshe's prophesy, just as the first Tochecha which G-d Himself had delivered, ended with hope and promise.

7. Why was this Tochecha split into two parts? Probably because Teshuva is so important that it requires the emphasis of a Sidra all its own...

8. Nothing is repeated in the Torah without good reason. Why, then, did Moshe repeat this warning?

Ramban explains that each refers to a different crisis in Jewish history. The first, in Behukotai, refers to the destruction of the first Holy Temple, Solomon's Temple, which took place about 2,500 years ago, in 586 BCE. The second declaration, in Ki Tavo and Nitzavim, which we read before Rosh Hashana, refers to the Second Holy Temple, destroyed 1900 years ago in the year 70 CE.

9. Rabbi Amiel, once Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, explains:

There are two kinds of national tragedy. The first is when a nation loses the characteristics of nationhood, its land, state and government. The second is when a nation loses pride in its heritage; when it loses its faith in its ability to create as a people: when it loses its will to live.

10. The first Tochecha tells of national collapse. The land and state would be lost. The people would be exiled. And so the warnings are all in the plural, addressed to all Israel together. And they foretell destruction of city and soil, that the land will be desolate, untilled, unplanted, its people exiled from it.

11. The second Tochecha tells of the disintegration of the morale of the Jewish people, the devastation of the Jewish soul. So the warnings are in the singular form. And they emphasize loss of courage and the will to live. "You shall have no faith in your existence", it declares.

12. Historically, that is how it was.

13. After the destruction of the first Temple, we rebuilt a transplanted Jewish community in Babylon. Our prophets taught us how to temporarily transplant the Jewish spirit to a strange soil. We built communities, synagogues, and schools. Great academies, Sura, Pumpedita, Masa Mehasia, thrived. And we firmly believed the promise that in only 70 years we would return home, and so it was. We returned to Jerusalem. And from it we spread once again throughout the land. We lived again, and thrived.

14. But after the destruction of the second Temple, only a small part of our people retained hope.

Many were ready to give up altogether, and to live a life of continuous mourning for the Temple, State, land, and people. Even great sages were amongst them. Some were so despondent, that they even wanted to cause the people to stop bearing children, so that we would not bring them into a world so full of Jewish suffering. In their despair they were ready to commit racial suicide.

15. A few great men amongst our people fought against this attitude. They were led by Rabbi Yehoshua, who taught that we must live life, carry on our tradition, transmit our heritage, enjoy Simcha even in the midst of sorrow, but always remember the Temple and Jerusalem, as stated in the Psalms: Im eshkech Yerushalayim tishkach yemini.

16. The Prophet Isaiah had foretold that there would be a few courageous men and women who would save our people, declaring that a tenth part would come and stand firm, and would succeed. Veod ba asiriya... (Yeshayahu 6:13) and Shear yashuv shear Yaakov el Kel Gibor (Yeshayahu 10:21).

17. In all of our history we kept our hope and dreams alive, in spite of good reason to lose hope. In the year 70, there were five times as many Jews in the world as there were during the French Revolution in 1789. And we in our time have diminished from almost 17 million Jews in 1939 to perhaps 11 million today.

18. Dreams of State and government would never have served to keep us hopeful and faithful, but only the dream of spiritual Israel: only the dream of Jerusalem, the symbol of the spirit of our people.

So we never say, Im eshkech Shomron, im eshkech haGalil, haNegev; We have always said, Im eshkech Yerushalayim, tishkach yemini. For Jerusalem stands for the living soul of our people, its hope and will to live.

19. That is why every Jew, everywhere in the world, knows with every fibre of his being that Jerusalem will never again be divided; and that it is not only the capital of the State of Israel, but also the capital of the people of Israel, everywhere in the world. And that is why we must react with a mighty protest at what the Arabs are doing to the Holiest site in Israel, the site of our Holy Temple, desecrating it, plundering it, destroying connection between us and our Temple.

20. The damage is not only to our people.

All of us know that the well-being of our people depends on the well-being of Jerusalem. Yevarechecha hashem miTziyon ureeh betuv Yerushalayim (Psalms 128:6.)

But we must make the world realize that their well-being too, depends on Jerusalem, as the Zohar declares: (Vayikra 36) "When Jerusalem is blessed, the whole world is blessed."

21. Ein Hakadosh Baruch Hu atid lenachem et Yerushalayim ela beshalom. (Sifri Zuta, Naso, 26) The greatest blessing of Jerusalem and its only consolation will be peace. It is that blessing that will flow from Jerusalem to the whole world.

So, for the blessing of peace, the whole world depends on Jerusalem, city of peace. May it materialize in our time, so that in earthly Jerusalem as well as in heavenly Jerusalem peace shall reign; Ose shalom bimromav, Hu yaase shalom, alenu veal kal Yisrael, veimru amen. *****