

This week in our double portion, we begin in parashat **Behar** with a discussion of the laws of **Shemittah** (Sabbath of the Land) and **Yovel** (50<sup>th</sup> year – Jubilee). Then, we immediately move into the list of **blessings** and **curses** that begins parashat **Bechukotai**. Our focus will be to examine a particular portion of the **curses** concerning the **desolation** of the **Land**:

*Vayikra 26:32 I will bring the land to desolation (shamem - שָׁמֵם), and your enemies who dwell in it shall be astonished (shamem - שָׁמֵם) at it.<sup>33</sup> I will scatter you among the nations and draw out a sword after you; your land shall be desolate (shamem - שָׁמֵם) and your cities waste.<sup>34</sup> Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate (shamem - שָׁמֵם) and you are in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths.<sup>35</sup> As long as it lies desolate (shamem - שָׁמֵם) it shall rest -- for the time it did not rest on your sabbaths when you dwelt in it.*

As the **children of Israel** are **scattered into the nations**, the **abandoned Land** becomes **desolate** (shamem - שָׁמֵם) and as a result, will be able to **enjoy its Sabbath rests**. It is **during their exile**, that they will make **confession** of the **sin of rejecting His statutes**, triggering the **response** of יְהוָה to once again **remember the Land**:

*Vayikra 26:40 'But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me,<sup>41</sup> and that I also have walked contrary to them and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt --<sup>42</sup> then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land.<sup>43</sup> .... they will accept their guilt, because they despised My judgments and because their soul abhorred My statutes.*

**Land** is a very **significant topic** in **parashat Bechukotai** – in fact, “**land**” is mentioned **25 times**. The word for “**desolation**” (shamem - שָׁמֵם) is mentioned **multiple times** in regards to the **land**, and the word **Shabbat** appears **7 times** in **verses 31-35**. Thus we can make the deduction that the **focus** in these verses is **not on the people** going **off into exile**, but rather on the **land** and its **resultant desolation**. Why is “**desolated land**” a **punishment** for the **disobedient nation**?

**Iben Ezra** provides the following insight:

“**Your enemies** will be **astonished**” – it will be **so desolate** that even **your enemies** who dwell there will **note its desolation**; it will be the **opposite** of “**the joy of the entire earth.**”

**Iben Ezra** points us to **Lamentations 2:15**:

*Lamentations 2:15 All who pass by clap their hands at you; They hiss and shake their heads At the daughter of Jerusalem: "Is this the city that is called 'The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth'?"*

The **once beautiful city** whose **purpose** was to bring “**joy**” to the **entire earth**, was now a **desolation** (שָׁמֵם). **Those who saw it felt the power of its destruction**. This **destruction** and **desolation** of the **Land** therefore become a **source of shame** to the **nation** to which the **Land** was given.

**Desolation** (דִּשְׁוֹן) is, in fact, a **testimony** to the **sins of the people**. During the time of **Solomon**, he also was **warned** that **if they sinned**, the **Temple** would be **destroyed**:

*1 Kings 9:7 "then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and this house which I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight. Israel will be a proverb and a byword among all peoples. <sup>8</sup> "And as for this house, which is exalted, everyone who passes by it will be astonished (דִּשְׁוֹן) and will hiss, and say, 'Why has יהוה done thus to this land and to this house?' <sup>9</sup> "Then they will answer, 'Because they forsook יהוה their God, who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore יהוה has brought all this calamity on them.' "*

There is a **sense of horror and shock** brought about by **viewing the desolation** (דִּשְׁוֹן). In fact, “**astonished**” (verse 8) is translated from the **same word** (דִּשְׁוֹן) as “**desolate.**” Viewing the **desolation** brings an **emptiness** to the viewer. **Those witnessing** are **aware** that **Israel’s sin** has brought about **this disaster**. This **punishment** inflicted on Israel brings about several **consequences**:

1. **Shame** to the nation
2. **Testifies** of the nation’s sins
3. **Feeling of despair** while in exile
4. **Difficulty in ever returning** to such a **desolate place**

While the **desolation** (דִּשְׁוֹן) of the Land is a **curse**, some commentators have been able to find a **hidden blessing** in this. **Jewish Midrash** points out that **Israel’s enemies** will also **not succeed** in **making the land flourish** during the time **Israel is exiled from her Land**. We saw a **modern-day testimony** of this when the **Jews were evicted from Gaza**. The **once prosperous agricultural areas** did **not produce** for the **new tenants**. It seems the **Land is unwilling to respond to anyone else**. The **Land awaits the return of the people of Israel** from exile, and **only when they return** to their Land will it once again begin to **flourish**.

In **1865 Mark Twain** visited **Israel** and wrote of his impressions in his book, **The Innocents Abroad**:

- A **desolation** is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action...
- **Jerusalem is mournful, and dreary, and lifeless**. I would not desire to live here...it has lost all its ancient grandeur, and has become a **pauper village**
- **Nazareth is forlorn...where the hosts of Israel entered the Promised Land with songs of rejoicing**, one finds **only a squalid camp** of fantastic Bedouins of the desert

In **1967**, an **American editor** of a later edition of **Twain’s book**, visited **Israel** and wrote: “**There is no doubt that Zionism has transformed this ugly valley into a green and blooming land.**” It is truly **remarkable** what you see when you visit the Land today. We are reading in our Torah portion a description of the **desolation** during its **exile**. As a **complement**, **Ezekiel 36** pictures the **flourishing of the Land** as **Israel** begins its **return**:

*Ezekiel 36:4 'therefore, O mountains of Israel, hear the word of Adonai יהוה! Thus says Adonai יהוה to the mountains, the hills, the rivers, the valleys, the desolate (דִּשְׁוֹן) wastes, and the cities that have been forsaken, which became plunder and mockery to the rest of the nations all around -- ...you, O mountains*

*of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel, for they are about to come.*<sup>9</sup> "For indeed I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown."<sup>10</sup> "I will multiply men upon you, all the house of Israel, all of it; and **the cities shall be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt.**"<sup>11</sup> "I will multiply upon you man and beast; and they shall increase and bear young; **I will make you inhabited as in former times, and do better for you than at your beginnings. Then you shall know that I am אלהים.**"<sup>12</sup> "Yes, I will cause men to walk on you, My people Israel; they shall take possession of you, and you shall be their inheritance; no more shall you bereave them of children."

We have noticed that the **focus of parashat Bechukotai** is **mainly on the Land**, its **desolation**, and its **Sabbaths**. The **exile** of the people from the Land is **mentioned**, but not much detail is given. We can **compare** the information given in **Devarim** where the **focus of the curses** is on the **people**:

*Devarim 28:63* "And it shall be, that just as אלהים rejoiced over you to do you good and multiply you, so אלהים will rejoice over you to **destroy you and bring you to nothing; and you shall be plucked from off the land which you go to possess.**"<sup>64</sup> "Then אלהים will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known -- wood and stone."<sup>65</sup> "And among those nations you shall find no rest, nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place; but there אלהים will give you a **trembling heart, failing eyes, and anguish of soul.**"<sup>66</sup> "Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life."<sup>67</sup> "In the morning you shall say, 'Oh, that it were evening!' And at evening you shall say, 'Oh, that it were morning!' because of the fear which terrifies your heart, and because of the sight which your eyes see."<sup>68</sup> "And אלהים will take you back to Egypt in ships, by the way of which I said to you, 'You shall never see it again.' And there you shall be offered for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you."

As you can see, the **Sabbaths of the Land** are not even mentioned as we read only of the **crises of exile**. In parashat **Bechukotai**, the **exile** is **briefly** presented from the **perspective of the people**, but **mainly focused** on the **perspective of the Land**. **Bechukotai's purpose** seems to be that the **Land** must be **given its rest (Sabbath)**.

"**Sabbath of the Land**" is mentioned repeatedly:

*Vayikra 26:34* Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate and you are in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths.<sup>35</sup> As long as it lies desolate it shall rest -- for the time it did not rest on your sabbaths when you dwelt in it...<sup>43</sup> The land also shall be left empty by them, and will enjoy its sabbaths while it lies desolate without them...

We first read of this **required Sabbath** in the **beginning of parashat Behar**:

*Vayikra 25:2* "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a sabbath to אלהים.'<sup>3</sup> 'Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather its fruit;<sup>4</sup> 'but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of **solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to אלהים.** You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard.'<sup>5</sup> 'What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is **a year of rest for the land.**'<sup>6</sup> 'And the sabbath produce of the land shall be food for you: for

*you, your male and female servants, your hired man, and the stranger who dwells with you,<sup>7</sup> 'for your livestock and the beasts that are in your land -- all its produce shall be for food.*

The **commandment for the Sabbath is for the Land, not man!** Israel must **avoid** doing any **activities** that will **keep the Land from its Sabbath**. If because of his actions, the **Land is not allowed to rest**, then **Israel will be expelled from the Land**. So exactly **what is the Almighty trying to teach us?**

**Chapter 25** began with the **commandment** about the “**Sabbath of the Land**”, or the **Shemittah**. Then it continues into the **commandment** for the “**Jubilee Year**”, or the **Yovel**. **Seven Shemittah cycles** brings us to the **50<sup>th</sup> year**, which is the **Yovel**. In the **Yovel year**, the **Land is again not cultivated**. Also during the **Yovel year**, **all inheritances return** to their **original owners** and all **slaves are freed to return to their families**.

**Vayikra** provides us with the **reason why the Land is returned**:

*Vayikra 25:23 ' The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me.*

The laws of **Shemittah and Yovel together express** the idea that the **Land belongs to יהוה**. During **most years, man makes use of the soil and the Land becomes like his own property** which he uses **for his own needs**. **Once every seven years**, however, he has to **stand back and acknowledge** that he has **no right to the Land** because it really **does not belong to him**. The **original inheritors do not really OWN the Land**. יהוה tells us that the **Land is HIS**. However, He has **chosen to give it to His children for their needs and through the observance of Shemittah and Yovel, יהוה's nature is intended to be expressed**.

What is so **unique** about this **Land**? **Devarim** speaks of its **specialness** to the **Almighty**:

*Devarim 11:10 "For the land which you go to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it by foot, as a vegetable garden;<sup>11</sup> "but the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven,<sup>12</sup> "a land for which יהוה your Elohim cares; the eyes of יהוה your Elohim are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the very end of the year.*

Although **in Egypt the land around the Nile has a plentiful water supply**, the **Land of Israel is a Land that is dependent upon יהוה**. In order for there to be **water for the crops**, there must be a **relationship between Him and His chosen inhabitants**. **Rain is conditional** upon this **relationship**:

*Devarim 11:13 ' And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love יהוה your Elohim and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul,<sup>14</sup> 'then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil.<sup>15</sup> 'And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled.'<sup>16</sup> "Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them,<sup>17</sup> "lest יהוה's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which יהוה is giving you.*

In **Egypt**, agriculture is **dependent upon human labor**, but in the **Land of Israel**, plant growth is **dependent upon the spiritual state of the nation**. In the beginning of Torah we first read of these **relationships**:

*Bereshith 2:5 before any plant of the field was in the earth and before any herb of the field had grown. For אדמה לא הייתה גורמת שמים יורדו לארץ, ויש אדם לעבד את האדמה;*

A quote from **Rashi** on this verse:

“Why had HaShem not yet brought rain? Because “there was no man to till the ground”; there was no one to recognize the goodness of rain. When man appeared and understood that rain is essential for the world, he prayed for it, and rain came down, and then the trees and plants grew. There was a direct connection between the cultivation of the Land and man’s recognition of and prayer to HaShem.”

**Adam sinned** in the **Garden** by **eating from the Tree of Knowledge**. He was allowed to eat from any of the trees in the Garden, **except from this tree**. This **prohibition expressed אלהים’ ownership** of the **Garden**. **Adam was required to recognize that the Garden did not belong to him...and he must obey the Owner of the Garden**. **When he ate** from this tree, it was as if he was saying...**everything belongs to me, I can do whatever I want here**.

What were the **ramifications** of **Adam’s sin**?

1. *Bereshith 3:17 ... "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it..."*
  - When man **fails to understand אלהים’ ownership of the Land**, he will **experience difficulty in cultivating it**. It will not easily respond to him
2. *Bereshith 3:23 therefore אלהים Elohim sent him out of the Garden of Eden...*
  - Is this **exile**? The **Garden** was a place where **man** was able to **directly communicate with אלהים**. Since **Adam did not recognize אלהים’ ownership** of the Garden, he was **no longer allowed to live there**.

Since “*the eyes of אלהים are always upon it*”, the **Land of Israel** can be seen as a sort of **Garden of Eden**. The **Shemittah year** points us **back to the Garden of Eden** and the **trusting relationship** of man with **His Creator**:

*Vayikra 25:20 'And if you say, "What shall we eat in the seventh year, since we shall not sow nor gather in our produce?"<sup>21</sup> Then I will command My blessing on you in the sixth year, and it will bring forth produce enough for three years.*

The **Shemittah year** reminds us of **how things were in the Garden** – the **Land gave forth its blessing** and **man was able to enjoy that produce without any effort!** It all **flowed from the Almighty’s blessing** (Vayikra 25:21), which only comes about as the **result of obedience** to His **commandments**.

Today, the **greening of the Land** is a sure **sign** of the **beginning** of the **restoration**. With the **return** of the **Jews** (Jew first) to their **Land**, it **testifies** of the **special bond** between the people of **Israel** and the **Land**. It is the **beginning** of a **gradual return** to the **reality of the Garden of Eden**:

*Vayikra 25:18 ' So you shall observe My statutes and keep My judgments, and perform them; and you will dwell in the land in safety.<sup>19</sup> 'Then the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell there in safety.*

Now just “one more thing.” “**Desolation**” (shamem - שָׁמֵם) is a word that **describes the Land** once the children have been **exiled**. This **word** is used by **Yeshua** to **describe an incident** in the **end of days**:

*Matthew 24:15 " Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand),*

**Yeshua** is referencing a **prophecy** in **Daniel 9**:

*Daniel 9:27 Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; But in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate (shamem - שָׁמֵם), even until the end. And that which is determined, shall pour out on the desolater (shamem - שָׁמֵם)."*

**Today no one** can yet **precisely explain** what is being **prophesied** here. **Yeshua** tells us that **when we see this event, then we will “understand.”** Remember that “**desolation**” (shamem - שָׁמֵם) is a **major inner response of horror** to an **outward scene**. It brings about an **awareness of sin towards יהוה** as the **cause of the desolation**. According to **Yeshua**, this is the **trigger** for the **time of the Great Tribulation**.

So to summarize...the **7<sup>th</sup> year** was a year when the **Israelites** were **not allowed** to **work the Land**. Instead, they were to **open their gates** to everyone so that **all could have a share in the fruits from the holy table of יהוה**. It was **intended** to **teach the Israelites** that they are **יהוה's guests** living in **His special Land**. The **Shemittah cycle, patterned after the weekly cycles, is a rhythm in time** designed to help us constantly keep in mind that **יהוה is the true Owner of the entire world around us**. He is **truly compassionate** and **obedience to Him** will put in motion an **idyllic world** where all would be provided for.

The **highest level of awareness** pointed to the **Jubilee year (50<sup>th</sup>)**. Its **theme of freedom** seems to **parallel the present season**, as we **count the days of the Omer** in the **seven-fold count of the days and weeks leading up to the 50<sup>th</sup> day**, the **season of the giving of the Torah and the giving of the Holy Spirit**. All of these events symbolize the **same thing – freedom**.

We have **dug deeply** into the book of **Vayikra**. Certainly it doesn't all make sense to us yet, but **revelation is continuing to rain upon us**. **Baruch HaShem יהוה!**

**Shabbat Shalom!**

*Ardelle*

**Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!**

חזק חזק ונתחזק