

A Muse: Ki Tavo 2008

“Now if you obey the Lord your God, to observe faithfully all his commandments which I enjoin upon you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings shall come upon you and take effect, if you will but heed the word of the Lord your God....But if you do not obey the Lord your God to observe faithfully all his commandments and laws which I enjoin upon you this day and do not deviate to the right or to the left from any of the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day and turn to the worship of other gods....” (Deuteronomy 28: 1-15)

Twice in the Bible is the *tochecha* (exhortation) given to the Israelites. The first exhortation was given at Horev (Sinai) and found in Leviticus and the second, in our parsha was given in the Plains of Moab. On the surface they sound the same: A stern, severe warning to follow the commandments as stated in the Torah, otherwise catastrophe will befall the people of Israel. However, when taking a closer look at the text there are notable differences between the two, which may or may not prove problematic from a theological point of view.

The first “exhortation” differs in structure from the second. While the first *tochecha* at Horeb ranks the punishments from weaker to stronger, relating them to the different kinds of sinful behavior or lack of attentiveness to the mitzvot, the second “exhortation” does not gauge the strength and severity of the punishments and doesn’t link them to the level of sin. More significant however is the difference in tenor between the two.

At Horeb, the first “exhortation” is hopeful. Even in the worst possible scenario there is still hope, because God will always remember the covenant made with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In calling attention to the covenant made with our patriarchs, the linkage between the patriarchs and the destiny of the children of Israel is underscored. While we may be judged for our behavior, God will take into consideration the covenants made with our forefathers. However, in the second “exhortation”, there is no mention of the covenantal relationship and isn’t hopeful. Here God will be judging

us solely on our own merit without taking into consideration our history, pedigree and the covenants struck with the patriarchs.

The Ramban notes this significant difference and suggests the following interpretation of the two exhortations. The first “exhortation” is referring to the destruction of the first Temple and the second exhortation is referring to the destruction of the second Temple. The first “exhortation” holds out hope for a “return”, because God is taking into account the everlasting covenants struck with our forefathers. Therefore, while there was an exile after the destruction of the first Temple there was a return and a second Temple was built.

The second “exhortation” does not reference the covenantal relationship and there was no return after the second Temple was destroyed and we were exiled. The Ramban understands the second “exhortation” as a death sentence and as with any death it is final. The only other option is for a “techiyat hametim”, a Resurrection of the Dead.

The theological conundrum of course is the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Would this be considered the “techiyat hameitim” that the Ramban referred too? And if this is “techiyat hameitim” might it be referring too, to the destruction of European Jewry and their resurrection in the form of Israel? This of course would have to assume then that the Holocaust was part of the divine plan! If one were not to accept Ramban’s concept of “techiyat Hameitim” as manifested by the birth of Israel how would one explain the “return” and establishment of the State of Israel in religious terms?