

The Age of Chastisement is Over

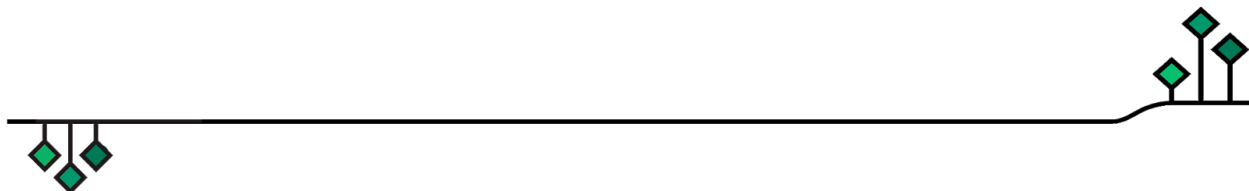
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Parashat Ki Tavo 5781

The *parashah* of Ki Tavo is one of two Torah portions that contain the *tokhehah* (chastisement) passages.¹ These verses articulate the dominant biblical theology of history, that Jewish exile and suffering is brought on by the sins of the people. This interpretation enabled the Jews to be steadfast in their faith during millennia of suffering, because God was punishing them out of love, and they had only to repent and be delivered. After the Holocaust, however, we must interpret theology and history anew.

In the Bible, God controls history tightly. If Israel is faithful to God and its calling, then God blesses the people on their land, and assures their victory over their enemies. If Israel turns to foreign gods or betrays its covenantal obligations, then the Lord punishes and defeats them, typically through sending an oppressing empire to crush them. The *tokhehah* in Ki Tavo describes in ferocious detail the devastating suffering that God will inflict on Jewry for its sins—including defeat in battle, virulent plagues, drought and starvation, exile from the land, and war, captivity, and slavery for the next generation.

¹ The other is in Parashat BeHukkotai, at the end of Leviticus.

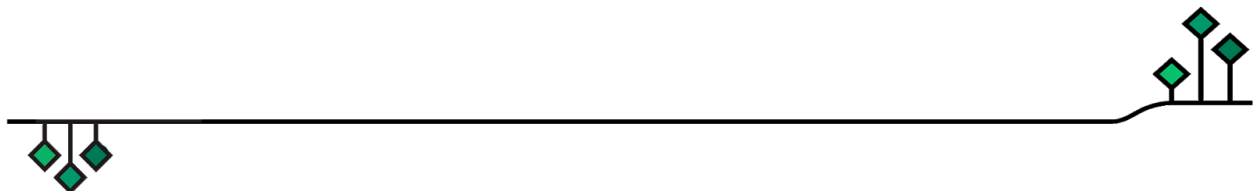


In ancient and medieval times, most people interpreted their fate in history as the outcome of the power of their gods. Therefore when the Assyrian empire ruled, most of the local populations accepted the Assyrian gods and religion since they had defeated the local deities.² So, too, in medieval times, when Islam spread by military victories. Muslims interpreted their conquests as a statement of Allah's power and often imposed their religion by the sword. While local populations generally accepted the triumphant religion, the Jews believed there was only one God who, as punishment, occasionally allowed other religionists to rule over them. They remained loyal to God who was pulling the strings of history and keeping them in exile until they would repent. Then the Lord would unleash the Divine power and save them.

Unfortunately, this theology, which kept Jewry faithful, turned into an ethic of passivity. Only God could end the exile, so there was never a serious mass movement to return to the Land of Israel and recover the dignity of sovereignty. When the early modern Zionist movement began and dreamed of recreating a Jewish commonwealth, the majority of Jews who were religious insisted that it was impious to try to redeem the land by human initiative. Most Orthodox Jews insisted that it would take divine action to be redeemed. In every Holiday Musaf prayer, the congregation would recite "*Mipnei hata'einu*, because of our sins we were exiled from our land... we are not able to go up to appear to bow before You and perform our duties in Your chosen house..."³ Jewry continued to read the *tokhehah* in Parashat Ki Tavo as the key to the condition of exile. The *tokhehah* verses were so frightful that a custom grew to read them rapidly, almost *sotto voce*, so that these curses not become activated and possibly

² See II Kings 18-19 (especially 18:19-35), when the Assyrian representative explains the empire's conquests as the triumph of their gods. He asks the Judahites to follow suit and shift from worship of God to accept Assyrian rule and religion.

³ Jonathan Sacks (ed.), *Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem, 2015), p. 813.



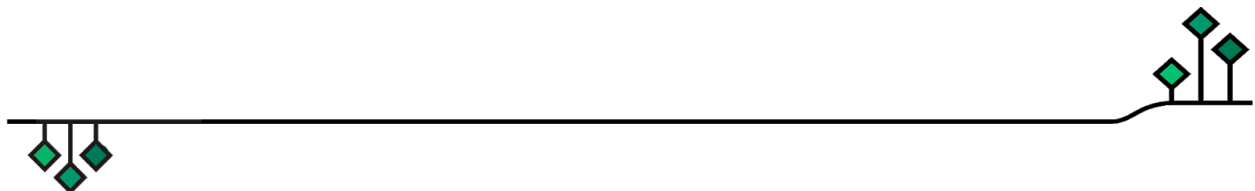
be brought down on the head of the living generation. Every year, the ghettoized pariah people would read the *tokhehah* passages, and wonder when Jewry would have suffered enough so that God would send them a savior and end the exile.

After the Holocaust, we came to see that Jewish history was no longer under the sign of the *tokhehah*. In the summer of 1944, when the mass murder of Hungarian Jewry reached 10,000 killed every day, Jewish children were dumped, alive, directly into the body burning pits of Auschwitz—whether to economize on gas or because there was no room in the gas chambers. For me, encountering this horrific event was the moment when I understood definitively that there was no sin for which this could be a divine punishment. For that matter, the ghetto of total isolation, terror and starvation, the never-ending deportations and torture, the limitless humiliation and degradation—none of these can be explained as punishment for sin that any God that I could worship or love would impose.⁴

Furthermore, the interpretation that the Shoah is inflicted by divine wrath leads to outrageous conclusions. Some religious Jews (most of the haredi/Hasidic communities) thought to “uphold” God by insisting that this catastrophe was inflicted by God because of Jewish failure to follow the Torah. Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman, himself a *tzaddik* and a martyr to the Nazis, wrote that the two main idolatries that modern Jews pursued were nationalism (i.e. Zionism) and socialism. Said Wasserman: “*In heaven these two false religions have been combined into one. A terrible stick of wrath⁵ to punish Jews murderously...* National Socialism [Nazism] has been created from the mix. The same impurities that we worshipped are now punishing

⁴ See Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Commentary and Modernity After the Holocaust”, in Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era* (Ktav, 1979), pp. 9-10, 23.

⁵ Compare Isaiah 10:5: “...Assyria, the rod of My [God’s] anger.”



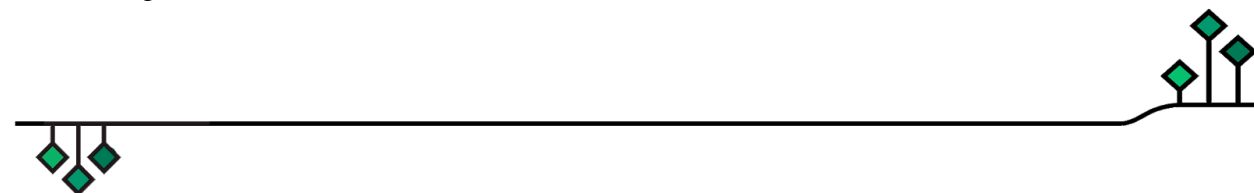
us.”⁶ In other words, instead of faulting the Nazis who wreaked all this murderous cruelty, and/or the Allies and neighbors who collaborated or stood by, Wasserman blames the victims and their causes. Instead of honoring all victims as martyrs and all Jews who chose to live on as Jews as heroes, this logic devalues the Jews of *tikkun olam* (world repair) and degrades non-observant Zionists as to blame for bringing on this catastrophe by their behavior.

The argument of Shoah as divine retaliation is also undermined by statistics. Of ultra-Orthodox Jews, 80-90% of them were killed in the Holocaust, a higher percentage than any other group. By contrast, 95% of (mostly secularized, assimilated) Danish Jews were saved. In general, integrated Jews had a better chance of survival (however low that might be) because they had connections and more potential access to non-Jewish help than did the separatist, ultra-religious Jews.

Another relevant statistic is that, in countries where non-Jews took significant action to save Jews, Jewish survival rates were much higher. In Poland 90%, and in Lithuania 95%, of the Jews were killed. In contrast, 50,000 Bulgarian Jews were saved by the Bulgarian government and people. In Belgium’s sympathetic Walloon counties (Francophone, anti-German, more liberal populations), 25% of the Jewish population were killed. In hostile Flemish counties (German-influenced, more conservative, and more anti-Semitic populations), 75% of the Jews were killed.⁷

⁶ Elhanan Wasserman, *The Onset of the Messiah*, section 21, excerpted in Steven Katz, Shlomo Biderman, Gershon Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2017), p. 36. Emphasis is mine.

⁷ Statistics on other countries and analysis of Jewish survival rates are found in my book, *The Triumph of Life* (forthcoming).



In wrestling with the implication of the Holocaust for six decades, I have come to the understanding that the nature of divine control has shifted over Jewish history. The Rabbis taught that, after the destruction of the Temple, God renewed the covenant but self-limited again, inviting humans to take more responsibility in the covenant and in history.⁸ Human decisions and policies would have more impact on the outcome of historical situations. Thus, our liturgy states that “we were exiled for our sins.” But the sins were not so much against God (such as idolatry, murder, and incest) as in the first Temple destruction. The Talmud describes the sins as intra-human misbehaviors: Jews humiliating fellow Jews, while the Rabbis looked away; zealots recklessly revolting against Rome instead of negotiating; zealots burning food supplies to force fellow Jews to fight Rome, and so on.⁹ This rabbinic insight of the divine policy shift led me to develop the stages of the covenant theology, in which God hands over greater human responsibility, and no longer overturns natural law to assure righteous Jews the victory (as in the splitting of the Reed Sea in biblical times).¹⁰

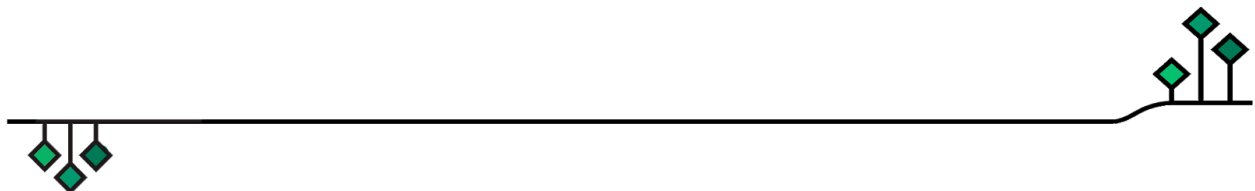
Today we are in the Third Stage of the covenant, in which God is totally hidden but totally present in Jewish (and human) fate. The Divine has handed humans total responsibility to realize the covenant in history, and God works entirely through human agents and natural laws. God was present and sharing the suffering in the ghettos, concentration camps, and gas chambers. But the Nazis used their freedom to amass overwhelming power in their effort to wipe out the Jews. European Jews were powerless, and the state of Israel did not exist to offer them asylum. The almost total failure of the Allies to act and stop the destruction of the

⁸ This is the theological concept known as *tzimtzum*, self-limitation. For more discussion, see my essay for Seventh Day Pesah, “The Once and Future Exodus,” available here:

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/once-and-future-exodus>.

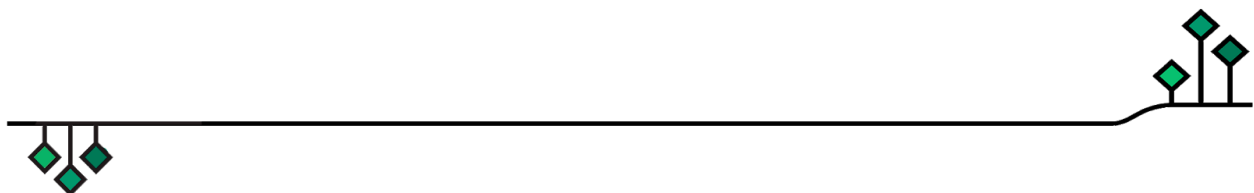
⁹ See Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55a and ff.

¹⁰ See I. Greenberg, “The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History” and also “Voluntary Covenant” (available at www.rabbiirvinggreenberg.com), and further developed in *The Triumph of Life* (forthcoming).



Jews, and the bystanding and/or collaboration of the non-Jewish neighbors, led to the catastrophic outcome of the Shoah. It was not Jewish sins that brought on the disaster. It was the sins of commission and omission of all of humanity that caused the death of the six million. Prevention of future holocausts requires not repentance, but that Jews take power to defend themselves, and that the world develop a culture of solidarity and responsibility to prevent genocide against Jews or any other group.

Another application of this principle: in exercising Jewish power, the Jewish state—no matter how it strives—is incapable of being ethically without blemish. All exercises of power by all human entities are inescapably flawed. Therefore, Israel’s right to exist cannot depend on its meeting the perfection standard of ethics. Those who speak of God expecting Israel to live by higher standards or He will evict the Jews—“the land will spit them out,” to use biblical language (e.g. Leviticus 20:22)—are well-intentioned idealists. However they are mistaken. Survival will depend on Israel being strong and responsible in its policies, and building solid, dependable alliances (including with Diaspora Jews), and normalizing relationships with other nations. If the Jewish state’s fate is conditioned on its meeting a certain standard of moral excellence—and other nations not so—then this is a double standard that endangers Israel. I hope and work for an Israel setting a highest moral standard in its policies. I believe that, overall, it has met this test. But unrealistic expectations and conditioned support for its right to existence are unfair and immoral. As partners with God, we have to redouble our efforts to strengthen Israel. This includes to help it treat all its people and its neighbors, including the Palestinians, with dignity, and redoubling our efforts to assure that the United States be a reliable and understanding ally.



We have not stopped reading the *tokhe^hah* passages. As we read them quickly and in a low voice, we should acknowledge that God no longer works that way in our world. The divine shift is meant to call us to a higher level of responsibility.

