

Parashat Ki Tissa (and Haftara Parshat Para)

“Lama Yomru HaGoyim”

- Should we care what the Goyim think?

David Ben-Gurion is famed to have said: "*What matters is not what the Gentiles will say, but what the Jews will do*".

I would suggest that our parasha presents an alternative view! As we shall see, one of Moses' favourite claims in the defence of Bnei Yisrael relates to the claims of the Gentile world: "*Lama Yomru HaGoyim!*"

In the aftermath of the sin of the Egel, the Golden Calf, God sentences the Israelites to absolute destruction. Moshe Rabbeinu pleads their case masterfully, and saves the fate of the nation. One of his arguments will be the topic of our shiur this week. Moshe suggests that if God destroys the nation, it will "look bad." He seems to argue that God should care about World Opinion. In our days, we frequently debate whether the State of Israel should act on the basis of what she sees as correct, or whether Israel should be concerned with the coverage on CNN, the opinions of the U.S. administration, the E.U. or the U.N. How might our parasha enlighten us in this discussion?

Chavruta Sources:

1. In a Tanach, see:

- Shemot 32:8-14 and in particular vs.12
- Bamidbar 14:11-20

2. The notion of God caring what the nations think is widespread in Tanach:

- Devarim 32:36
- Yehoshua 7:9,
- Melachim I 20:28,
- Yirmiyahu 20:44,
- Yechezkel 20:44, 36:16-36,
- Tehillim 79:10, 115:2.

3. How does this work?

- Ramban Devarim 32:36 "VehaTaam beTaana Hazot."

Shiur:

(11)...Why, O Lord, let Your anger blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. (12) Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from your blazing anger and renounce your intent to punish Your people!

... (14) And God renounced the plan to destroy His people.

Moshe is described by the Rabbis as the defence attorney of Bnei Yisrael. And it is certainly an apt caricature of Moshe. After all, his skilful words transform God's mood from one of furious rage to forbearance and forgiveness. We have already analysed Moshe's prayer in a previous shiur. Today I would like to focus on one of Moshe's arguments in particular.

In the lines we have presented here, Moshe suggests that if God destroys the nation of Israel, Egypt will claim that Hashem is an evil cruel God. Does God really care about what Egypt might think?

Now this is not the only time that God demonstrates concern as to what gentile nations might think of him. We shall see that this is quite a pattern in Tanach (and you would do well to see our Mekorot listed above.) Moshe, after the report of the Spies, uses a similar argument:

"Moses replied to God, '**And what will happen when the Egyptians hear about it?** You have brought this nation out from among them with Your great power! **And what if they tell the people who live in this land?** They have heard that You, God, have been with this nation [Israel]. You, God, have revealed Yourself to them face to face, and Your cloud stands over them. You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire at night. 'Now you want to kill this [entire] nation like a single man! **The nations who hear this news about You will say that God was not able to bring this nation to the land that He swore to them, so He slaughtered them in the desert.**'" (Bamidbar 14)

Once again, Moshe successfully saves the day! Once again his central argument relates to the fact that a gentile nation (this time, the Canaanites) will get the wrong perception of Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

KIDDUSH HASHEM AND CHILLUL HASHEM

Why does God care about what the Goyim think? It would seem that the key to understanding here is the notion of Kiddush Hashem, and its opposite, Chillul (desecration) Hashem (of God's name.)

When we talk about Hashem – God's name – then maybe we understand the issue better. We do talk about blackening a person's name, or a person getting their name on the front page of the newspaper. A name is a reputation.

Now, when we deal with God's reputation, how is God's reputation, or if I may use more contemporary language – God's image - how is this image raised in the public eye, or how is it besmirched? One way is by God's actions themselves. If God acts, and people know that it is God, this will clearly affect His reputation. But another medium is Am

Yisrael. The name of God is inextricably linked to Yisrael, and hence, our destiny IS God's image, His public face!

And this is quite remarkable. God in this way is DEPENDENT upon Am Yisrael. Once we are linked to God, God's destiny is in some manner reliant, and sustained by the trail that Am Yisrael leave in the arena of human affairs.

I think that we can assert a few principles here. Each one is pretty remarkable:

1. God cares about His reputation
2. Am Yisrael bear god's reputation/ public image/ name / prestige / ratings!
3. At times, God will even save Am Yisrael (even though they are undeserving) "lemaan shemo"!

HAFTARAH FOR PARASHAT PARAH

This second and third point is articulated clearly by the prophet Yechezkel – Ezekiel. Yechezkel is the Navi of Galut. He lived in Babylon, and had to make sense of the destruction of the Temple, the loss of Jewish Sovereignty and the suffering and displacement experienced by the nation. Moreover, he had to sustain the faith in an eventual return to Zion. This is how Yechezkel views the process, and prime causes of Galut and Geula in ch.36. (The Haftara for Parshat Para)

"The word of the Lord came to me, saying: 'Son of man, when the House of Israel dwelt on their own soil, they defiled it with their way and by their deeds ... and I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; I punished them in accordance with their way and their deeds. But when they came unto the nations, **they profaned My holy name; in that it was said of them: These are the people of the Lord, yet they had to leave His land. And I was concerned for My holy name**, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they have come. Therefore say to the House of Israel: Thus says the Lord GOD: **Not for your sake shall I act, O house of Israel, but for My holy name**, which you have profaned among the nations... And I will sanctify My great name, which hath been profaned among the nations ...**and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord GOD, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes.** I will take you from among the nations and gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle pure water upon you, and you shall be purified ... and I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you..." (36:16-26)

The notion of Hillul Hashem and Kiddush Hashem is critical to this prophecy. Hillul Hashem is the phenomena of God's people being stateless, wandering aimlessly, displaced, lost. This reflects upon God, such that God appears powerless and withdrawn, withered and in a state of decay.

The revival of Israel, spiritually and physically – the return to our land, the renewal of independence, the religious revival – all constitute the restoration of God himself to His former status, and hence represent a Kiddush Hashem, a situation in which God's status is restored, His name given new standing, His values imbued with power, meaning and energy.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF AM YISRAEL

This philosophy is quite startling in its power. On the one hand we are stating that God cares so deeply about His reputation, His image, that he would be willing to emancipate the Jews from their Exile, **not because they are worthy, but in order to rehabilitate His name.** Now, we do need to clarify that God's "name" indicates the entire world vision that God seeks to bestow to this planet. God wants to see an atmosphere of compassion, a regime of Justice and honesty, a world of morality. However, the amazing thing here is the central role that Am Yisrael play, and the fact that God is prepared to make far-reaching concessions to Am Yisrael, **well beyond that which we deserve**, because we serve as a reflection of God to the world! Obviously, the flip-side of all of this is the responsibility that the Jewish nation bear upon our shoulders. We carry the name of God through the pages of History. Our story is directly linked to God's legacy. I guess that we have been killed throughout the centuries precisely because of this heavy legacy. And yet, from the positive perspective, it is certainly a sobering thought; no! an inspirational vision, that we have the potential to be the PR agents of God, that we are enfranchised to demonstrate God's values to the world. Do we, as a Jewish nation realise our role? Do we act as God's earthly representatives?

RAMBAN

Here I would like to quote two sources. The first is the Ramban. The Ramban – based on verses in Haazinu where God contemplates destroying the Jews – asks the obvious question; Why does God still put up with us? Why does he let the Jews survive, if we are the wayward stiff-necked people who constantly betray God and have such difficulty in following Him?

The Ramban replies:

"The Almighty created man to acknowledge and give thanks to His name, giving them free choice to do evil or good. When mankind fell into sin, only this one people (Israel) remained to publicise His name. Through them he publicized his name via miracles and wonders, that He is the God of all Gods ... to be known throughout the nations. Now **should the memory of Israel be forgotten, the peoples would forget His signs and wonders and this would utterly defeat the purpose of creation.** No one would survive who would know Him.... The will that was behind creation, therefore, justified the raising up of an eternal people, close to Him, knowing Him more than all the peoples. Moses used this argument to persuade God to spare His people and God indeed forgave them according to Moses' word." (Ramban to Devarim 32:36)

A LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS

In more recent times, Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits z"l (Chief Rabbi of Great Britain 1967-1991) in a book about Zionism uses the sources that we have seen here and states the following:

"For me, the concept of *Kiddush Hashem*, the urge to make a salutary impression on the world, constitutes the heart of Zionism. The very word *Zion* means 'Signpost' or 'Showpiece'. When Abraham, the founder of Zionism, was originally commanded to go to the Land, the blessings defining the aims of the journey culminated in the assurance and the charge: 'And in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.'

....I deem it (this theme) absolutely crucial to an authentic understanding of Israel's purpose. Here lies the gravamen of my charge against those - and they include many religious leaders - who dismiss the nations' attitude to Israel with indifference and as of no consequence. They not only justify their unconcern, but belabour those who do care by contemptuously hurling at them the purported quotation, 'What will the *goyim* say?' There is no such phrase in the Bible. What it does say IS the very opposite: 'Why should the *goyim* say...?' In plain words, we must not allow them to have a poor opinion of Israel and to denigrate our reputation, thus causing a *Chillul Hashem*; and therein lies our salvation! *Kiddush Hashem* has therefore always been the paramount theme in my projection of the Zionist ideal. What was required in the first instance was to cultivate the conscious pursuit of *Kiddush Hashem* as Israel's collective ambition, for intrinsic reasons as well as for the sublimation of Israel's image in the eyes of the world.

...What a *Kiddush Hashem* it would be if the front pages of the world's newspapers would one day report that Israel is the first country in the world to have eliminated crime and vice, and solved the problem of broken homes and social inequality, to have found the key to creating a better, more honest, more idealistic incorruptible society, in which people strive to make the times good rather than to have a good time." (If Only My People pgs 147-150)

IN CONCLUSION

The notion of *Kiddush Hashem* – although recorded as an independent Mitzva in Vayikra 22:32-3 is a pervading presence that resonates throughout Tanakh.

"Has any god ever ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another nation ... as the Lord did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? ... Know this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below." (Devarim 4:34,39)

God chose to bind his name eternally to the Jewish people. This remarkable fact is an expression of God's love. Exclusive relationships are love relationships. God connected His name to the Jewish people alone. Likewise, we believe in HASHEM ECHAD.

Along with that exclusive relationship comes huge privilege, and enormous responsibility. Our parasha tells a story of two sides of that exclusive relationship. On the one hand, our betrayal of God at the Egel engendered God's rage at the abrogation of our covenant. And yet, despite that, the notion that Israel and God are linked eternally implies that God's vision will only be realised by the success of the Jewish people. In this Parasha, in the story of the Golden Calf, it is this that ensures our survival.

And yet, the path is long, and the work is unfinished. We have much to do, internally and externally if we are to live up to our legacy as God's people. May we take that role seriously, demonstrating to the entire world how life can be lived so that we may demonstrate to the world that life may be lived with sanctity, kindness, compassion and truth.

Shabbat Shalom!