Dvar Torah for Parshat Bechukotai

God of Trauma

Binyamin Kagedan '02 | BronfmanTorah | Bechukotai 2016

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Israelites Carried Captive (illustration from the 1890 Holman Bible)

Learning to chant the parashah of Bekhukotai in preparation for my bar mitzvah, I remember feeling that I had been chosen for a great and solemn task. Upon my not-yet-broad shoulders rested the proper performance of the awe-inspiring *tokhekha*. Literally meaning “rebuke”, the *tokhekha* refers to Leviticus 26:15-46, and comprises a litany of progressively severe consequences should the Israelites fail to obey the terms of the covenant of Sinai. Here at the end of Leviticus, the largest part of the contract between God and Israel has already been stipulated. Following the typical format of an ancient Near Eastern vassal treaty, the document concludes by spelling out the costs of non-compliance.
The *tokhekha* is unsparing in its depiction of the personal and collective catastrophe of divine retribution:

20 And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield her produce, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit…
22 And I will send the beast of the field among you, which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number; and your ways shall become desolate…
29 And ye shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall ye eat.
33 And you will I scatter among the nations, and I will draw out the sword after you; and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.

If you are disturbed by these images, you are in good company. An old and widespread custom dictates that during the annual public reading of the *tokhekha*, the Torah reader is to lower their voice to a just audible decibel, and to chant quickly and without pauses, so as to spare the congregation from its full unpleasantness. This kind of quasi-censorship of the Torah text only happens twice in the entire annual cycle of Torah readings: here in Leviticus, and during a recapitulation of the *tokhekha* in Deuteronomy. And not without good reason, as the *tokhekha* possesses a rare extremity and grotesqueness among biblical depictions of divine retribution against Israel.

Spending most of my waking hours in the frame of clinical psychology, I couldn't help but start to think about the *tokhekha* in terms of the modern concept of trauma. The kinds of events predicted by the *tokhekha* – starvation, war, dislocation – are the ones we most associate today with the production of trauma on a massive scale. The practice of minimizing the valence of the *tokhkekha* in synagogue services implies that Jews in distant times and places were already sensitive to the idea of "trigger language".

But there is another expression of the theme of trauma in the *tokhekha* that is more profound and somewhat troubling. The *tokhekha* is structured as a narrative of Israel's downfall, beginning with agricultural and economic failure and ending with foreign conquest and exile. Each calamity reflects the loss of something tangible

(rain, produce, property, life), until right near the end, when the text takes a markedly psychological turn:

> **36** And as for them that are left of you, I will send a faintness into their heart in the lands of their enemies; and the sound of a driven leaf shall chase them; and they shall flee, as one fleeth from the sword; and they shall fall when none pursueth.

What is threatened here is unmistakable as the essence of traumatic stress. Trauma is characterized as the loss of a basic sense of existential safety in the world. Victims of traumatic violence frequently exhibit what is called hyper-vigilance, a habit of constantly and painstakingly monitoring one's surroundings for the threat of physical harm. The original feelings of terror and powerlessness that arose in response to the traumatic event continually bleed into present reality, even when danger is nowhere near. *And they shall flee as one fleeth from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursueth.*

Paying close attention to these verses for the first time, I noticed myself feeling uncommonly disturbed by the bible text. Even among such an impressive list of divinely ordained disasters, the explicit threat of traumatization stood out as particularly cruel and extreme. Familiar (and perhaps desensitized) as I am with biblical tropes depicting God's wrath, I bristled at the notion that divine justice be served through this kind of subtle torture, the scarring of the innermost self.

Throughout the Torah we meet a variety of divine personas, one of which is the great judge in the heavens, supreme arbiter of justice. But in the threat of trauma I perceive the voice of a different manifestation of the biblical deity, one that recurs throughout the Hebrew Bible, and that is of God as a lover scorned. Jewish interpretive tradition has long understood the covenant of Sinai through the metaphor of a marriage contract. The *tokhekha* then seems less a code of criminal law than a loud warning about relational betrayal. Speaking here is the is self-described 'jealous' god, who, above all else, demands absolute loyalty. This character seems familiar with, and incredibly sensitive to, the sting of betrayal. We can hear in the fiery intensity of the *tokhekha* a desperate effort to preempt the

repetition of an old relational wound - we might say, of God's own trauma.

Let us then imagine the God of the *tokhekha* as the god of trauma, *the traumatized god.* If the Torah is a record of God's relationship with humanity, we can safely say it is the story of one heartbreak after another. From the very start, God's most precious creation, into which God breathed God's own essence, proved an unreliable partner: starting with the indiscretions of Adam and Eve, followed by the murder of Abel, then the tower of Babel, the generation of Noah, and on and on. Like any person that has been hurt or abandoned by a succession of fickle partners, God at the covenant of Sinai seems to have all but lost the ability to trust. We can now hear that final segment of the *tokhekha,* not as an example of justice gone off the rails, but as the disclosure of a troubled psychological reality. *If you make me lose faith in you,* God warns, *I will rob you of your faith in the goodness of life, so that you shall what feel what I must feel.*

…

And yet still the book is never fully closed. Trauma can be resolved, even the oldest scars begin to fade with the right kind of attention and compassion. As the *tokhkekha* comes to an abrupt end, the Torah reader slows down and raises their voice to proclaim, *And even after all this*; for where life exists, where love can return, the possibility of healing is inextinguishable.

Shabbat Shalom

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