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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

NECHAMA LEIBOWITZ Z"l'S WORKSHEET ON THE SHABBAT HAGADOL HAFTORAH

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A recent conversation with a wonderful college student reminded me of how privileged I am to have learned directly from Nechama Leibowitz z"l. Nechama famously hand-corrected every written answer she received for her *gilyonot* = worksheets, and I certainly made my share of mistakes in class. So it is with considerable trepidation that I present this response to her 5725 worksheet on the haftorah of Shabbat HaGadol, available at <https://www.nechama.org.il/pages/180.html>. There is at least one answer I am very unsure of, and corrections are welcome.

Please also see the attached Summer Beit Midrash flyer and share it with anyone who might be an appropriate candidate, and consider applying yourself.

Our focus this week is Malakhi 3:6.

כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה לֹא שֹׁנֵיתִי
וְאַתֶּם בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב לֹא כִלִיתֶם:

Because I Hashem lo shaniti
and you Bnei Yaakov lo kh'liytem

The fundamental difficulty with this verse (worksheet question #1) is that while the structure of the verse suggests a comparison or contrasting of Hashem and Bnei Yaakov, the verbs *shaniti* and *kh'liytem* are not obviously parallel or antithetical. A subsidiary issue is that *shaniti* seems to be a transitive verb but has no object, and *kh'liytem* seems to have Bnei Yaakov as its subject and also have no object. Thus a mechanical translator might come up with

Because I Hashem have not changed (anything)
and you Bnei Yaakov have not finished
(anything).

1. Rashi

Rashi translates *shaniti* as a sort-of reflexive: "Even though I take a long time before expressing anger, **לֹא שֹׁנֵיתָ דַּעְתִּי עָלַי** = my mind has not changed on me from what it was initially so as to love the bad and hate the good." He converts *kh'liytem* into a passive: "and you Bnei Yaakov, even though you die while still wicked (2) and I exacted no compensation from you while you were alive, **אֵינְכֶם כְּלִים מִלְפָּנַי** – you have not ceased to exist in My presence and you have left me your souls to exact My justice from in Gehennom." Rashi then cites Targum Yonatan, which frames this verse as a response to a popular misperception that death is an escape from Divine justice.

The upshot is that the verse makes a single argument: That good things happen to bad people while they are alive does not indicate that G-d loves their deeds, because He can still punish them in death.

2. Radak

Radak inserts an implied object for *shaniti*. Because G-d never changes His mind, therefore "My words will never change, and all the statements about the future that I have made to you via My prophets will come to pass. **לֹא אֲשֵׁנָה מְדַבֵּר לְדַבֵּר וּמִחֲפָץ לְחֲפָץ** = I will not change from one *davar* to another, or from one desired outcome to another. **וְאַתֶּם לֹא כִלִיתֶם כְּמוֹ שְׂכֹל שֶׁאֵר בְּאַמּוֹת** = and you Bnei Yaakov have not ceased to exist in the way that other nations have, with their names ceasing to be mentioned and their national existence ended, rather you have not ceased and you will not cease to be.

The upshot is again a consistent single argument, but one with a message about as far from Rashi's as imaginable. Because G-d does not change, the bad things have happened to Jews for a long time are not evidence that He will not keep the positive promises He made to us long ago.

3. Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra explains *lo shaniti* as **לֹא יִקְרָה לִי שִׁינוּי** = change cannot happen to Me. He explains *lo kh'liytem* as **כִּי אִם מֵת הָאֵב נִשְׁאַר הַבֵּן** = because even if the father dies, the son remains. The upshot is that G-d and the Jewish people are parallel in their eternity.

Ibn Ezra's interpretation seems to have an obvious weakness (23, marked superhard!). The Jewish people does in fact change, in that fathers give way to sons, even though the nation maintains its identity through the changes. Therefore the eternities of G-d and the Jewish people are not truly parallel.

4. Abravanel

Abravanel's translation seems to follow Rashi. However, whereas Rashi made the verse about G-d's constancy in hating evil, and thus about His meting out justice after death, Abravanel describes G-d as constantly loving *mishpat v'tzedek*, and refers to Him meting out גְּמוּלָה = desserts after death, apparently both rewards and punishments.

5. Mikra KiPeshuto

Mikra KiPeshuto was the work of an apikoros (and perhaps eventual apostate) named Arnold Bogomil Ehrlich (1848-1919, Russia-Germany-New York). <https://www.nechama.org.il/pages/180.html> describes him as an extreme Bible critic who nonetheless strongly opposed Christian critics as lacking a true literary ear for the Bible.

Ehrlich's presents the verse's overall argument as follows: "Just as I Hashem have not changed, and remain steadfastly good, so too you have not changed and remain steadfastly evil, meaning

that you remain Bnei Yaakov whose actions were via *ikvah* trickery . . . the verse says this because it will refer to their trickery in evading the tithes”.

Ehrlich claims that his translation of *lo kh'liytem* is parallel to the third clause of I Samuel 3:2:

וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא,

וְעָלִי שָׁכַב בְּמִקְוָמוֹ;

וְעֵינָיו הִחְלוּ כְהוֹת,

לֹא יוּכַל לִרְאוֹת

On that day,
and Eli lying in his place
and his eyes began dim
he could not see.

Question א5 (which Nechama marked as hard) asks what the parallel is. My very hesitant suggestion is that the relevant phrase includes an implied “to be”, i.e. “and his eyes began להיות/to be dim”, and similarly our verse should be read as “and you have not ceased להיות/to be the descendants of Yaakov”, i.e. you continue his unwholesome ways. (Note: As jarring as Ehrlich’s commentary may seem here, it is clear that the name Yaakov is used as a negative marker elsewhere in Tanakh – see e.g. Yirmiyahu 9:3 and Hosheia 14:4.)

Ehrlich’s approach is more in consonance with the structure of the verse than those of the traditional commentators, because he has both a parallel and a contrast between G-d and the Jewish people: Each are steadfast, but in opposite ways.

Each of the commentaries above understood *shaniti* as a form of “change”. However, Midrash Tanchuma (Buber, Nitzavim 1) understands it (ב1) as “do a second time”.

אמר ר' חנינא בר פפא:

אמר הקב"ה:

מעולם לא הכיתי אומה ושנית בה

אבל אתם בני יעקב – לא כליתם

שנאמר (דברים לב:כג):

חצי אכלה בם –

חצי כליו, והם אינם כליו

Said R. Chanina bar Papa:

“Said the Holy Blessed One:

I have never struck a nation and struck it a
second time (because the first blow is always
fatal)

except that you Bnei Yaakov – have not ceased
to exist

as Scripture says (Devarim 32:23)

אכלה = I will use up my arrows on them –

My arrows will cease, but they will not have
ceased to exist.

The upshot is that the verse contrasts G-d’s arrows and the Jewish people, rather than G-d and the Jewish people.

The Tanchuma’s interpretation was the one I knew before the worksheet, and along with Radak’s, it still seems to me the most consonant with the structure of the verse (א6). Ibn Ezra, as noted

above, generates a highly imperfect parallel; Rashi and Abravanel’s parallel is better but still not convincing, as a shift from dualistic to purely spiritual existence is certainly also a change. Ehrlich requires making Bnei Yaakov the indirect object rather than the subject of *kh'liytem*, and thus *וְאַתֶּם בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב* and *אֲנִי ה'* are not grammatically parallel in his reading.

Which readings fit best in the context of the surrounding verses?

The traditional parshiyot reasonably locate 3:6 in a unit stretching from 2:17 – 3:12.

2:17 describes the Jews as wearying G-d with complaints that the ongoing success of evil prove either that He sees the wicked as good and desirable, or else that He is not interested in justice. 3:1-5 is G-d’s response, warning those complaining to be careful what they wish for, because His justice will come soon, and will involve purifying the Jewish people by force (=smelting) of its many evildoers. Then “the meal-offerings of Yehudah will be pleasant to Him as in days of yore and ancient years”. But G-d will still be an avenging witness against those who acted without fear of Him.

3:7-12 has G-d describes the Jews as sinning “from the days of their ancestors”, and yet His wish is “return to Me and I will return to you”. He then sets up the giving of tithes as a mutual test – if the Jews pass, they can hold Him to a promise of bountiful harvests, to the point that they become the envy of all other nations.

Rashi, Abravanel, and Radak each read 3:6 as responding to the Jews’ complaint in 2:17 that G-d’s justice has not been apparent in the world. Ehrlich reads it instead as leading into G-d’s claim in 3:7 that the Jews have always been sinners. I do not understand how Ibn Ezra fits in context – since his interpretation seems weakest both locally and contextually, I suspect that I am either misinterpreting him or else missing a key piece of evidence.

But again, the Tanchuma seems to me the best fit. The overall tone of the section is one of ambivalence – the Jews have done much wrong, and must be punished, and yet G-d still “imagines” an eventual reconciliation. Malakhi’s rhetoric however makes clear that G-d cannot effect that reconciliation unilaterally – we must return to Him before He returns to us. What He can do, and promises to do, is restrain His anger and justice in order to ensure that our opportunity for repentance is eternal.

For the American generation following the Holocaust, it seemed unreasonable not to echo 2:17 and complain that His justice was not manifest in the world. The enduring success of the State of Israel altered the question – now His goodness and generosity were manifest, but were they distributed justly? Rabbi Soloveitchik provided a framing from Song of Songs in which G-d abandons Malakhi’s framework and “knocks on the door” first, and our job is to become deserving of the bounty He has already given us. The temptation that must be resisted is to imagine that we are already deserving.

Shabbat Shalom!

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