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PARASHAT BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI

Exile, the Land in Desolation and the Land Lying Fallow
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Parashat Behar discusses the laws of Shemitta and Yovel. Immediately thereafter comes the list of blessings and curses, at the beginning of Parashat Bechukotai.

We shall begin by examining an excerpt from the curses. In chapter 26, verses 31-43, the Torah describes the punishment of destruction and exile:

(31)I will make your cities waste, and your sanctuaries a desolation, and I will not smell the sweet savors of your offerings.

(32)And I will make the land desolate, and your enemies who dwell in it will be astonished.

(33)And I will scatter you among the nations, and will draw out a sword after you, and your land will be desolate, and your cities waste.

(34)Then the land will enjoy its sabbaths, for all the days of its desolation while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths.

(35)All the days of its desolation it shall rest, because it did not rest during your sabbaths, when you dwelled in it...

In verses 36-39 the Torah goes on to describe the troubles that will befall the nation in exile. However, the introduction to this description, in verses 31-35, is particularly interesting.

Seemingly, the description of the exile should begin as in verse 33, "I shall scatter you among the nations," followed by the list of trials and suffering that awaits there, as set out in verses 36-39, along with the obvious result of the exile of the nation: "Your land will be desolate." [1]

However, the verses reveal a different emphasis. The description of the exile begins with the desolation of the land, and in the verse that concludes the punishment of exile, the text once again returns to the sabbaths of the land:

Thus the land will be abandoned by them, and shall enjoy its sabbaths while it is desolate from them. And they will make amends for their sin, because and for the reason that they despised My judgments and their soul abhorred My statutes. (43)

Aside from the fact that the introduction and conclusion of the subject of exile focus on the land, the subject of the land, its desolation and its sabbaths are repeated several times in these verses:[2]

The word "land" appears seven times (six times in the above verses and once in verse 42, "And I will remember the land.")

The root sh-m-m (desolation) recurs seven times in these verses (six times in verses 31-35 and again in verse 43.)

The root sh-b-t (shabbat, sabbath) likewise appears seven times (six times in verses 31-35 and then again in verse 43.)

Hence, our impression is that the focus is not on the nation going off into exile, but rather on the land and its desolation. This perception comes across particularly starkly in verse 32: "I will make the land desolate, and your enemies who dwell in it will be astonished." Not only will the land be desolate, since no-one lives there and there is no-one to cultivate it; God will ensure that the land remains desolate, even when other nations come and try to cultivate it!

Once again we sense that there is significance to the desolation of the land, and not only the punishment of the nation in that it is exiled from the land.

What is the significance of the desolation of the land?

Desolation of the Land – Punishment for the Nation

We can understand that the desolation of the land is part of the punishment for the nation. The punishment of exile is comprised of two elements:

One – the dispersion of the nation in other lands, among enemies who persecute them;
The other – their land remains desolate.

In what way is the desolation of the land a punishment for the nation? If the nation is not living in its land, why does it matter that the land is desolate?

Shame

Ibn Ezra provides the following insight:

]"Your enemies] will be astonished" – it will be so desolate that even your enemies who dwell there will note its desolation; it will be the opposite of "the joy of the entire earth".

Ibn Ezra directs us to the verse in Eikha 2:15:

All who pass by clap their hands at you,
They hiss and shake their heads over the daughter of Yerushalayim:
Is this the city that is said to be 'the epitome of beauty, the joy of the entire earth?'

The verse in Eikha describes the huge metamorphosis that comes with the destruction, where the once beautiful city becomes a city of desolation, to the extent that all those who view it feel the power of the destruction.

The destruction and desolation of the land are a source of shame to the nation to which the land belongs.

Testimony to Sins

In God's words to Shelomo following the construction of the Temple, He warns the nation that if they sin, the Temple may be destroyed:

Then I will cut Israel from the land which I have given to them, and this House, which I have sanctified for My Name, I will cast off from before Me, and Israel will be a proverb and a byword among all the nations.

And this House will be held high: all who pass by it will be astonished and will hiss, and they will say: Why has God done this to this land and to this House?

And they will say: It is because they abandoned the Lord their God Who took their forefathers from the land of Egypt, and they took hold of other gods, and bowed to them and worshipped them. Therefore the Lord brought all of this evil upon them. (I Melakhim 9:7-9)

This warning makes another point clear: when the land lies desolate, the destruction is striking. People who pass through the land ask themselves why the land was destroyed, and they are reminded of the nation's sins, which led to the destruction.

In other words, the great transformation of a beautiful and flourishing land into one that is destroyed and desolate, and remains desolate, is a perpetual reminder of the nation's sins. This is the greatest shame for the nation.

Length of the Exile

Rashi introduces a different idea. "'And your land will be desolate' – you will not soon return to it; thus, 'Your cities will be waste' – they will seem to you like wasteland. For when a person is exiled from his house, from his vineyard and from his city but he (knows that he) is destined to return, it is as though his vineyard and house are not destroyed, as we learn in Torat Kohanim."^[3]

According to Rashi's view, the nation in exile feels that it will not be returning to the land in the near future, and therefore from the point of view of their feelings, the land is desolate. The punishment, according to this view, is the feeling that the land lies beyond their reach.

In addition, when the land lies desolate for so many years, with no-one succeeding in settling it, it becomes very difficult to return there. Indeed, throughout the many generations of Jewish exile, the desolation of the land discouraged many people from returning to it, for fear that they would not be able to survive. Thus, the fact that the land remains desolate has the effect of further (psychologically) distancing the nation from it, giving rise to a feeling that it is impossible to return to it.

The essence of the punishment, then, is a sense of despair, which makes life even more difficult for the nation in exile, along with extending the time that the nation dwells in exile.

It is clear, then, that there are several aspects to the desolation of the land as a curse, part of the punishment inflicted on Israel:

- a. The desolation of the land causes shame to the nation to which the land belongs;
- b. The desolation of the land testifies to the nation's sins, which brought about the destruction; it is therefore a source of shame, a perpetual accusation.
- c. The nation is punished by a sense that they will not soon be returning to the land; they therefore feel that the land is desolate and lies beyond their reach.
- d. When the land is so desolate, it is difficult to return to it. This in turn extends the duration of the exile, and causes profound despair.

The Blessing Within the Curse of Desolation

Although the desolation of the land is a curse, some commentators detect a ray of light within this dark cloud:

"'And I shall make the land desolate' – this is a good thing, so that Israel will not say, 'Since we were exiled from our land, now our enemies come and find gratification there' As it is written, 'Your enemies who dwell in it will be astonished' – even the enemies who come later will find no gratification there...."[4] (Torat Kohanim, chapter 6)

The Midrash opens a different perspective on the desolation of the land. The fact that Israel's enemies will not succeed in making the land flourish will be a good sign for Israel.[5] Israel's enemies, who have exiled Israel from their land, are unable to enjoy the goodness of the land.

If the enemies were able to make the land flourish, Israel's feeling in exile would be even worse. They would wonder, like Eliyahu, "Have you then murdered and also taken possession?!" However, God does not allow the nations to benefit from having removed Israel from their land .

It would seem, though, that the significance of this situation extends far beyond a "good feeling".

No nation can settle the land and make it its own, in place of the nation of Israel. Thus, the possibility of Israel returning to the land always remains open.[6]

Beyond this, however, the fact that other nations cannot manage to hold onto this land is a constant testimony that the land belongs to the nation of Israel. The land waits, as it were, for its children to return; it is unwilling to respond to anyone else.

The desolation of the land, then, testifies to the special connection between Am Yisrael and the land of Israel.

Ramban comments, in this spirit:[7]

When God says here, 'Your enemies will be astonished,' it is good news concerning all the exiles – that our land will not accept our enemies. This represents a great proof and promise to us: that nowhere can one find a land that is good and expansive, and which was once inhabited, that is [now] desolate like [Eretz Yisrael]. For since we left it, it has not accepted any nation or people; all try to settle it, but they do not succeed"....

Indeed, throughout the years of exile, the land remained desolate, as attested to by Mark Twain:[8]

A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action...

Jerusalem is mournful, and dreary, and lifeless. I would not desire to live here...

Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes... Nazareth is forlorn; about that ford of Jordan where the hosts of Israel entered the Promised Land with songs of rejoicing, one finds only a squalid camp of fantastic Bedouins of the desert; Jericho the accursed, lies a moldering ruin, to-day, even as Joshua's miracle left it more than three thousand years ago... Renowned Jerusalem itself, the stateliest name in history, has lost all its ancient grandeur, and is become a pauper village...

The first of the Jewish pioneers came to a land of swamps and desolation. However, when they began to settle the land, the land responded to their efforts, and they succeeded in cultivating it.

The flourishing of the land at the hands of the Jews, after two thousand years of desolation, is remarkable in its fulfillment of the description in Parashat Bechukotai, except that the Torah there presents only the negative aspect – a description of the desolation during the exile. The complement to that description appears in Yechezkel 36, depicting the flourishing of the land in the wake of Am Yisrael's return:

So says the Lord God, to the mountains and to the hills, to the streams and to the valleys, to the desolate wastes and to the abandoned cities, which have become a prey and a derision to the rest of the nations around...

As for you, you mountains of Israel – you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My nation, Israel, for they will soon come.

For behold, I am for you, and I shall turn to you, and you will be tilled and sown.

And I will multiply men upon you – all of the house of Israel, in whole; and the cities will be inhabited, and the desolate places rebuilt. (4, 8-10)

The destruction of the land causes the nations to scorn it, but when Am Yisrael returns, the land once again flourishes.

A well-known Midrash concerning these verses appears in Ketuvot 68a:

"Rabbi Abba said: There is no more revealed sign of the redemption than this, as it is written (Yechezkel 36), 'As for you, you mountains of Israel – you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My nation, Israel, for they will soon come'".

Indeed, during the early years of the Zionist movement, the flourishing of the land was perceived as a sign that this was the beginning of the redemption. Rav Kook, in his "Chazon ha-Geula" (Jerusalem, 5701) wrote:

"The beginning of the redemption is unquestionably unfolding gradually before us. From the time when the mountains of Israel began to shoot forth branches and to yield fruit for Am Yisrael, who had started to come back, this beginning commenced"....

Hence, the desolation of the land, representing part of the curse to Am Yisrael in the wake of their sins, also includes a promise and a blessing: Eretz Yisrael will not respond to any other nation. It awaits the return of Am Yisrael from exile, and only when they return to their land will the land once again flourish.

This fact testifies to the special relationship between Am Yisrael and their land.

Bechukotai vs. Ki Tavo

Thus far we have discussed how the desolation is part of the phenomenon of the exile of Am Yisrael from their land. If the Torah had wanted to emphasize the exile of the nation, and to teach us that as part of the punishment meted out to the nation the land will remain desolate, verse 43 alone would have sufficed. And if the Torah had wanted to promise Am Yisrael that the land would "wait" for them, and not accept their enemies, it could have added verse 32: "And your enemies will be astonished".

However, as noted, the description of the exile in Parashat Bechukotai has a different focus. As we saw above, verses 31-35 – which introduce the description of the exile in Parashat Bechukotai – emphasize the land, the desolation of the land, and its sabbaths. The exile of the nation from the land is mentioned, but it occupies a secondary place rather than being presented as the main subject.

This phenomenon is underlined by a comparison with the portion of curses in Sefer Devarim, in Parashat Ki Tavo, where the exile is similarly presented as the final punishment:

...God will rejoice over you to destroy you and to annihilate you, and you will be plucked from the land to which you come, to take possession of it.

And God will scatter you among all the nations, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth...

And among those nations you will have no ease, nor will there be any rest for the sole of your foot, but God will give you there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and despair of mind.

And your life will hang in doubt before you, and you will fear night and day, and will have no assurance of your life...

And God will return you to Egypt in ships... and you will be put for sale there to your enemies as slaves and maidservants, and none will buy. (Devarim 28:63-68)

In Parashat Ki Tavo, the exile is described from the perspective of the nation: we read of the dispersion of Am Yisrael among the other lands, and the suffering in those places. There is no reference to the land at all.

Seemingly, this is what we would expect of a description of exile: the sinful nation is punished by being cast out of their land, and undergoing the trials and tribulations of exile.

In Parashat Bechukotai, the exile is presented not from the perspective of the nation, but rather from the perspective of the land. Exile is not only a punishment meted out to the nation for its sins, but also a means of awarding the land its rightful rest.

Sabbaths of the Land

What is the meaning of the "sabbath of the land," mentioned no less than six times (!) in verses 34-35, and then once again in verse 43?

Let us return to the beginning of Parashat Behar:

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them: When you come to the land which I give to you, then the land shall observe a sabbath unto God.

For six years you shall sow your field...

And in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of sabbaths for the land, a sabbath unto God; you shall not sow your field, nor shall you prune your vineyard.

You shall not reap as your harvest that which grows on its own, nor shall you gather grapes of your undressed vine; it is a year of resting for the land.

And the sabbath produce of the land shall be yours for eating...

And for your beasts and for your livestock that are in your land shall all of its produce be, for food. (Vayikra 25:2-7)

In these verses Bnei Yisrael are commanded to observe Shemitta, which is referred to here as a "shabbat (sabbath) for the land." The commandment applies, as it were, to the land rather than to man: "The land shall observe a sabbath!"

The land must rest, and therefore man must refrain from certain activities which prevent the land from resting.[9]

This being the case, the overall picture that emerges from the parashot of Behar-Bechukotai is that the land "needs" to rest, and if Am Yisrael do not permit this to happen, as they are commanded to in Parashat Behar, then they will be removed from the land in order to give the land its rest,[10] as described in Parashat Bechukotai.

What is So Important About the Land Resting?

Parashat Behar opens with a commandment about the "sabbath of the land" – Shemitta – and continues with the commandment of Yovel – the Jubilee year. Yovel is presented in direct relation to the commandment of Shemitta: the counting of seven Shemitta cycles brings us to the fiftieth year, which is Yovel. The Yovel year is an additional year of Shemitta, where once again the land may not be cultivated. In addition, however, the Yovel year has the additional characteristic of "You shall return, every man to his possession, and every man to his family".

In the Yovel year, all inheritances return to their original owners, and all slaves are freed to return to their families.

How does the Torah explain the return of every inheritance to its owner?

"The land shall not be sold forever, for the land is Mine; you are strangers and sojourners with Me." [11] (23)

The laws of Shemitta and Yovel together express the idea that the land belongs to God. During most years, man makes use of the soil, the earth, and the land becomes like his own property which he can use for his needs.

Once every seven years, man must stand back, stop using the land as though it were his own property, and relate to it as "God's land." He has no right to use it, because it does not belong to him.

During the Yovel year, the restoring of all inheritances to their owners does not imply that those inheritances belong to their original owners. On the contrary – the inheritances in the land belong to God; therefore, there is no validity to the buying or selling of them. The soil of the land does not belong to man, and therefore he cannot sell the inheritance that he received. Nor can he purchase the land of someone else. The soil of Eretz Yisrael is not the property of man; rather, it belongs to God.

God's Land

When Am Yisrael receives the land from God, they are expected to understand that the land does not belong to them, as their own property, but rather it is God's land, and is given to them, God's nation.

How is the uniqueness of this land, as belonging to God, expressed?

Prior to the entry into the land, the Torah describes for Am Yisrael the very special nature of the land that they are about to inherit:

For the land to which you come, to take possession of it – it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you are departed, where you would sow your seed and water it with your foot, like a vegetable garden.

For the land to which you pass over, to take possession of it, is a land of mountains and hills; it drinks water from the rain of the heavens.

It is a land that the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year. (Devarim 11:10-12)

Seemingly, the land of Egypt has an advantage over Eretz Yisrael: its water supply is plentiful and constant; the land is not dependent on rain. However, this disadvantage of Eretz Yisrael is also its strength: the inhabitants of this land are constantly dependent on God's blessing. Rain is not a constant, dependable source of water; there must be a permanent relationship with God in order to obtain this gift.

When does God grant rain?

The Torah goes on to describe the conditions:

And it will be, if you will diligently listen to My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your spirit,

Then I will give your land its rain at the proper time, the early rain and the latter rain, and you will gather your corn and your wine and your oil.

And I will put grass in your field for your animals, and you will eat and be satisfied.

Guard yourselves lest your heart be deceived and your turn aside and serve other gods and worship them.

For then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and He will shut up the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not offer its produce, and you will quickly die off from upon the good land which the Lord gives to you. (13-17)

Cultivation of Eretz Yisrael is not like the cultivation of land in other places. Anywhere else in the world, agricultural output is dependent on human labor. In Eretz Yisrael, the agricultural output is dependent upon the spiritual state of the nation. Without rain there can be no produce, and the rain in Eretz Yisrael is dependent upon obedience to God and His commandments.

Return to the Garden of Eden

The rain in Eretz Yisrael expresses the connection between man's behavior (as reflecting his spiritual state) and plant growth. This relationship appears for the first time in chapter 2 of Bereishit:

And no plant of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet grown, since the Lord God had not yet brought rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground. (5)

Commenting on this verse, Rashi explains;

Why had God not yet brought rain? Because "there was no man to till the ground"; there was no-one to recognize the goodness of rain. When man appeared and understood that rain is essential for the world, he prayed for it, and rain came down, and then the trees and plants grew.

The primal world was the Garden of Eden, where there was a direct connection between the cultivation of the land and man's recognition of and prayer to God.

Adam's first sin was to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. God allowed him to enjoy all of the trees of the garden, forbidding him to eat only from one tree. This prohibition expressed God's ownership of the garden. Man had to recognize that the garden was not his own, and to obey the instructions of the Owner of the garden.

His eating from the forbidden tree was an expression of rebellions against the Owner of the garden, as if to say: Everything belongs to me; I can use everything as I wish.

As a result of man's sin, several changes took place in the world. We shall address two of them:

a. "Cursed is the land because of you; in sorrow you shall eat of it...." The land is cursed because of man's sin. When man fails to understand and acknowledge God's

ownership of the land, there is a severing that results in man experiencing difficulty in cultivating the land. God's land does not respond to man when he does not recognize it as belonging to God.

b. Man is banished from the Garden of Eden. Perhaps we may suggest that this is, in fact, the same punishment. The Garden of Eden is a place that affords a direct interrelationship between God, the land, and man. Man, failing to sense God's ownership of the garden, can no longer live in the Garden of Eden. He must move to a different reality, where he must work hard in order to bring forth vegetation from the land, and where there is no longer any relationship between his spiritual state and the success of his agricultural endeavors.

In the Garden of Eden, God brought forth trees that man could enjoy without hard work:

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, on the east, and He put there the man whom He had formed.

And the Lord God caused to grow from the ground every tree that is of pleasant appearance and good for food...

And the Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and to keep it.[12]

And the Lord God commanded the man saying, "You shall surely eat from every tree in the garden..." (8-9, 15-16)

In contrast, when man is removed from the Garden of Eden, he must exert great effort in order to bring forth bread from the ground.

"And the Lord God sent him away from the Garden of Eden to till the land..." (Bereishit 3:23)

The banishment from the Garden of Eden severs the land, as it were, from its ownership by God. The land everywhere else in the world is given to man, and he must exert great effort in order for the land to yield produce. From the moment of the banishment from the garden, the cultivation of the land is disconnected from man's spiritual state .

However, in one place that special connection between the land and God is maintained: in Eretz Yisrael. This land is called God's land, and "The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it." Therefore in Eretz Yisrael there remains a connection between serving God and working the ground to bring forth produce. Eretz Yisrael, then, is a sort of "Garden of Eden" within this world.

The Shemitta year is the strongest expression of the uniqueness of Eretz Yisrael. For one year man ceases to cultivate the land, and he thereby returns to the situation of the Garden of Eden .

If man does not engage in agricultural work, how will he survive the year?

And if you should say, "What shall we eat during the seventh year? For we shall not be sowing or gathering our produce!"

I have commanded My blessing for you during the sixth year, and it will give forth produce for the three years. (Vayikra 25:20-21)

Existence during the Shemitta year is something like the existence in the Garden of Eden: God commands His blessing, the land gives forth its produce, and man is able to enjoy that produce without needing to invest any effort!

In the simplest sense, this represents an economic blessing: there is no need to worry about sustenance for the Shemitta year. However, the significance of this blessing goes much further. The food of the Shemitta year is not only "effortless produce." It is produce that flows from God's blessing: "I have commanded My blessing for you... and it will give forth produce"....

This special blessing comes to Am Yisrael only when they fulfill the commandments of Shemitta and Yovel.

On the simplest level, this system is a matter of reward and punishment. If Am Yisrael observe Shemitta, they will be have produce and blessing. If they do not observe it, they will be punished .

However, we may look at this not only as a punishment, but also as a result. The unique quality of Eretz Yisrael is actualized through Am Yisrael living in the land – but only if they live by God's commandments, thereby demonstrating that the land belongs to God and that Am Yisrael are God's servants.

When Am Yisrael sense this special connection, observe the Torah and its commandments, and understand that they do not own the land (and express this through observance of Shemitta), for the land belongs to God, then the land operates as God's land, yielding its fruit. When Am Yisrael fails to understand the significance of the land as God's land, then the natural consequence is that the land fails to operate as God's land; it does not yield its fruit, and Am Yisrael is no longer able to dwell in it. And when Am Yisrael is removed from this land, the land remains desolate; "the nations will be astonished" because God's servants are no longer living there. Eretz Yisrael will not respond to other nations, and this is not only a promise to Am Yisrael, that they will return to the land; it is also a statement of consequences: in the absence of service of God by God's nation, there is no possibility of making anything grow in God's land.[13]

Eretz Yisrael flourishes only in a situation of Am Yisrael dwelling in the land and sensing God's ownership of the land. This feeling is expressed through observance of Shemitta, through which God's presence is revealed most tangibly, and by means of which Eretz Yisrael becomes something like the Garden of Eden.[14]

It is for this reason that the flowering of the land is the strongest expression and surest sign of the beginning of the redemption. With the return of Am Yisrael to their land, the flowering testifies to the special bond between Am Yisrael – God's nation, and Eretz Yisrael – God's land. It represents a gradual return to the reality of the Garden of Eden, a reality of "a land that God's eyes observe".

"And you shall perform My statutes and observe My judgments, and do them, and you shall dwell safely upon the land.

And the land will yield its fruit, and you shall eat your fill, and you shall dwell safely upon it...

And the land shall not be sold forever, for the land is Mine...." (Vayikra 25:18-19, 23)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]This, indeed, represents the structure of the portion of curses in Devarim 28:63-68. See discussion below.

[2]Specifically, seven-fold appearances are known to have special significance.

[3]Torat Kohanim, chapter 7: "'Your land will be desolate and your cities will be waste' – this is a harsh punishment for Israel. For when a person is banished from his vineyard and from his house, but is destined to return, then (in his mind) it is as though his vineyard and house are not laid waste. But this will not be the case for you; rather, 'Your land will be desolate' – why? Because you will not be destined (soon) to return." The idea that "you will not be destined to return" is exceptionally harsh, especially in light of the conclusion of the portion of curses, which contains a promise that the nation will return to its land. Rashi enlists this Midrash but softens it slightly.

[4]This interpretation appears also in Rashi's commentary.

[5]Why does the Midrash seek a "good sign" here, in the midst of what is clearly a curse? The Midrash even states explicitly that the desolation is part of the curse, as we saw above! The Chafetz Chayim explains as follows: "'A good sign for Israel' – that the blessed God appropriates it to Himself, saying, 'I Myself will make it desolate' – and therefore our Sages conclude that He says this only to show that it is a good sign for Israel.'" In other words, something that God does Himself cannot be only bad; there must be some good aspect to it.

[6]Admittedly, conflicts arose when Israel tried to return to its land, but had another nation settled in the land, established a state and caused the desert to bloom, the battle would unquestionably have been much more difficult.

[7]Ramban, commenting on verse 15, sets out his interpretation of the entire portion of the curses. To his view, the covenant in Parashat Bechukotai hints at the first exile, while the covenant in Parashat Ki Tavo hints at the second exile. With regard to our verse, however, Ramban asserts that this is a promise that covers all exiles.

[8]Mark Twain visited Eretz Yisrael in 1867 and noted his impressions in his work, *The Innocents Abroad*. The change so astounded the American editor of a later edition, describing that he came to the country in 1967 and was amazed to see the country flourishing, that he writes: "There is no doubt that Zionism has transformed this ugly valley into a green and blooming land." Another travel chronicle written at around the same time – "Journey to the Land of Israel" by Tristram, gives a similar description of the desolation.

[9]Cf. the commandment of Shemitta in Parashat Mishpatim, emphasizing its social aspect.

[10]The blessings at the beginning of Parashat Bechukotai likewise emphasize the land, and they parallel the blessings promised to the nation in chapter 28, verses 18-22, for observing Shemitta and Yovel. See at length in Elitzur Immanuel's article, "The Sabbath of the Land as an Expression of God's Will in Creation," *Megadim* 23 .

[11]This is the reason for the land returning to its owners. Concerning the release of slaves, we are told: "For Bnei Yisrael are servants to Me; they are My servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God" (verse 55.)

[12]See Ibn Ezra, who explains that all that man had to do was to water the garden and to guard it from animals.

[13]Even Am Yisrael, if they do not serve God, are removed from this land, as we are told in our parasha with regard to failure to observe Shemitta, and in Parashat Acharei-Mot

concerning the forbidden sexual relations: "So that the land will not expel you when you defile it...", as well as in other places.

[14]The aspiration is not to maintain the Shemitta situation indefinitely. Am Yisrael is meant to cultivate the earth and develop the land. However, leaving the land fallow during the Shemitta year will lead to a situation whereby even in the years to follow, man will cultivate, develop and upgrade, with a sense of God's presence in his work and a recognition of God's ownership of the land.