



GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT
BEHAR /
BECHUKOTAI

Solving the Biggest National Crisis

The climax of Leviticus presents a powerful duality: a vision of prosperity through obedience and a warning of suffering through defiance, both anchored in the covenant relationship. Part of the passage reads (Leviticus 26:36-37): "As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them. They will stumble over one another as though fleeing from the sword, even though no one is pursuing them; you will not be able to stand before your enemies."

Our Sages highlight one line in the excerpt above. "They shall stumble over one another" is expounded as "one because of the other." This became the sole source in the rabbinic literature for the principle of לזה זה ערבים זה - that all Jews are sureties for one another.

Upon analysis, however, there seem to be a number of difficulties surrounding this. Firstly, the text has nothing to do with responsibility, collective or otherwise. "Stumbling over one another" does not depict a nation bound by mutual responsibility; it is an account of chaos and fear. In their desperate attempt to flee, individuals trip over each other, each focused solely on personal survival rather than collective welfare. The plain sense of the verse does not seem to prompt this rabbinic interpretation at all!

Moreover, these verses do not depict the ordinary life of Israel, but rather a scene of collapse and desperation. The nation is being overrun by its enemies, and its people are scattered, fleeing as refugees. How can a passage describing exile and upheaval serve as the basis of a code of conduct?

The third difficulty is the most fundamental. The core assumption of the Torah — and of Jewish history — is that Israel's rewards and punishments are experienced collectively. The nation shares its fate as one people - together. Judaism is a collective faith. Despite its principled attachment to the dignity of the individual, its central experiences are not private but communal. On tisha b'Av, we mourn together. On Yom Kippur, we confess together. There should be no need to search for textual evidence to prove that Jews are bound together by a shared destiny, each responsible for the other — this is among the most fundamental principles of the Torah!

R' Jonathan Sacks offered a profound insight [1]. Indeed, the

question of the Sages was never regarding the source for 'all of Israel are responsible for one another,' as the whole Torah presupposes this concept. But that is because the Torah speaks of Israel as a nation of neighbors and fellow citizens who live and act together and whose actions naturally impact one another. The real query, however, was: where do we see that this principle endures even in exile - when the Jewish people are scattered, powerless, and no longer united by shared geography or political structure? After the Temple's destruction, some believed that the Jewish nation was nearing its end. Israel was no longer a nation in the conventional sense of a people living in a single territory under the same government. We had been condemned to a bitter exile and scattered - and that was when we experienced the deepest crisis in Jewish history. Was Israel still a nation? Sure, we would still share memories, dreams, and prayers - but within a few generations memories fade, dreams falter, and prayers unanswered slowly lapse into silence.

This explains why Chazal searched for a text where they did, in the passage of the curses. These verses, referring to a time when Jews would be in exile, hinted at the profound spiritual truth that in spite of Jews being shattered politically and dispersed geographically, they were still a nation. Even at such a low point, Jews would be bound by a covenant of mutual responsibility. Jewish fate and destiny would remain indivisible. That is how, from the epicenter of tragedy, the Sages rescued a vestige of hope. We may no longer be linked by physical proximity or shared citizenship, but we couldn't be more united spiritually. At the deepest level of emotion, the unity is palpable. When one Jew suffers, all Jews feel involved. The *Baal HaTanya* put it succinctly: "All Israelites are called brothers by virtue of the source of their souls in the one G-d; only their bodies are separated." Every Jewish soul is a literal part of G-d; just as there can be no divisions within G-d, there can't be divisions within the collective Jewish soul.

This mystical vision of nationhood defied natural limitations and is what allowed the Torah to survive for millennia in exile. Without it, Jews in *galut* might have gone their separate ways as individuals and there would be no Jewish people today.

[1] "To Heal a Fractured World" (pg. 85-95)

"For a better morning, talk with G-d first. For a better night, talk with G-d last. For a better life, talk with G-d all day."