

Haftarot Unrolled: Ki Teitzei

What If

The "ki" in Ki Teitzei is an interesting word. While in modern Hebrew, it means "because", in the Tanach, it has three additional meanings: "due to", "rather", and "if". The first verse of the Parsha is translated thus:

כִּי תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל אֹיְבֶיךָ וַיִּתְּנֶנּוּ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ וְשָׁבִיתָ שְׁבוּיִם
If you go to war with your enemies, and Hashem gives them to you, and you take captives... (Devarim 21:10)

The commandment is not "go to war", but rather, "if you go to war, then this is how you should behave". Similarly:

כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חָדָשׁ וְעָשִׂיתָ מַעֲקֶה לְגִגְדְּךָ וְלֹא תִשֵּׂים דְּמַיִם בְּבֵיתְךָ כִּי יִפֹּל הַנֶּפֶל מִמֶּנּוּ :
If you build a new house, you must make a fence for the roof, and not place liability upon your house, if a person should fall from it. (Devarim 22:8)

The commandment is not, "build a house", but rather, "if you build a house, then this is what you need to be concerned with."

In fact, the majority of Parshat Ki Teitzei consists of these "what if" commandments: "what if a person has two wives", "what if you see a bird's nest", "what if a man divorces his wife", "what if two men are fighting".

The Torah teaches us that life is varied and unpredictable; it presents all kinds of situations which we need to deal with, not all of them pleasant. It gives us the tools to handle a wide range of situations, from which we can derive how to handle all others.

Consequently, the Jewish People are experts at dealing with uncertainty; we are always aware that the only thing we can count on is change. The source of our ability to accept this, and even thrive on it, is the Torah itself and the "what ifs" of Parshat Ki Teitzei.

However, while in moderation, uncertainty may be constructive, the experience of Jewish People in Exile has been that of continuous instability and vulnerability. It is this feeling of insecurity, of the ground constantly shifting under our feet, that is the theme of the Haftarah of Ki Teitzei. Like the Parsha, the Haftarah of Ki Teitzei repeats the word "ki" in its various meanings and connotations, ten times in as many verses.

אַל תִּירָאִי כִּי לֹא תִבוֹשִׁי וְאֵל תִּכְלָמִי כִּי לֹא תַחְפִּירִי כִּי בִשֵּׁת עֲלוּמִיךָ תִּשְׁכַּחִי וְחֶרֶפַת אֶלְמְנוּתְךָ לֹא תִזְכָּרִי עוֹד ... כִּי כְאִשָּׁה עֲזוּבָה וְעֶצְוֶבֶת רִיחַ קָרָאךָ ה' וְאַשְׁתֵּי נְעוּרִים כִּי תִמְאַס אָמַר אֶ-לֹהֶיךָ
Do not fear, for you will not be shamed, do not be troubled, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, the disgrace of your loneliness you will recall no more... You were like a woman abandoned, depressed, when Hashem called to you; "As if one could reject the wife of one's youth?" asks your G-d. (Yeshayahu 54:4,6)

The great fear of our Exile has been that our condition of humiliation, poverty, and helplessness was not only a temporary punishment, but a sign that G-d no longer has any relationship with us at all. The Haftarah assures us that the upheavals that we faced with flexibility and resilience were not mere vagaries of fate, and that G-d has not abandoned us to be buffeted by forces beyond our control, with no meaning and no purpose.

But the years of uncertainty take a toll. When the Redemption finally comes, and Jerusalem is rebuilt, will we be able to convince ourselves that there will be no more upheavals and no more "what ifs"? Will we not ask ourselves, "What if we fail again?"

אמרו ישראל לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע לא כבר נבנית ירושלים וחרבה אמר להם ע"י עונותיכם חרבה וגליתם מתוכה אבל לעתיד לבא אני בונה אותה ואני הורס אותה לעולם
Israel said to G-d, "Master of the Universe! Hasn't Jerusalem been rebuilt and destroyed again?" He said, "Because of your sins it was destroyed and you were exiled, but in the future, I will build her and I will not destroy her ever!" (Midrash Tanchuma Noah 11)

According to the Midrash, the Jewish People will look at Redemption, and we will wonder if again the ground will shift under our feet, if everything we have worked for will again turn to dust. If Jerusalem was rebuilt and destroyed once before, what if that happens again?

The Haftarah of Ki Teitzei, the fifth in the series of the Haftarot of consolation and hope, offers the promise of stability:

כִּי מִי נָח זֹאת לִי אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מֵעַבְרַי מִי נָח עוֹד עַל הָאָרֶץ כֵּן נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מִקֶּצֶף עֲלֶיךָ וּמִגֶּעַר כָּף.
כִּי הֶהְרִים יְמוּשׁוּ וְהַגְבְּעוֹת תִּמְוָטְנָה וְחִסְדֵּי מֵאֲתָדָה לֹא יְמוּשׁוּ וּבְרִית שְׁלוֹמִי לֹא תִמְוָט אָמַר מֶלֶךְ מֶלֶךְ ה': ס
For it is like the Waters of Noach to Me, as I swore not to let the Waters of Noach pass over the land, so too I have sworn not to be angry at you, nor to chastise you.
Would even mountains wear away, and hills erode, My constancy will not wear away from you, and My covenant of peace will not erode, says He who shows mercy to you, Hashem. (Yeshayahu 54:9-10)

G-d swore to Noach that no matter what mankind does, no matter how badly they mess up His world, He will not destroy it again. Now G-d swears to the Jewish People that no matter how badly we mess up, He will not destroy Jerusalem again.

A nation that has seen everything that they had ever built abandoned and destroyed, knows to count on nothing. We know that mountains wear away and hills erode. But, because of this Haftarah, we also know that our relationship with G-d is eternal and solid. It is the source of our stability, and the consolation that has given us hope to survive until this day.

The Redemption will bring its own set of challenges, its own set of "what ifs", and we will need all the flexibility, creativity, and resilience that Parshat Ki Teitzei can teach us. But there is one "what if" that we do not need to worry about. The Haftarah tells us that once we reach this stage of Redemption, it will not be reversed. Jerusalem will be rebuilt, and stay rebuilt.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל