

Parashat Nitzavim נצבים Torah: Deuteronomy 29:9–30:20 Haftarah: Isaiah 61:10–63:9

If you read the Torah you do a good thing for the world, for were it not for the Torah, the world would long ago have been reduced to its primeval state of waste and desolation, Devarim Rabbah 8.5

Return

Parashiyot Nitzavim and *Vayelekh* are often combined as double portion. However, due to the important covenant business recorded in Parashat Nitzavim, we have intentionally separated the two commentaries.

In addition to containing some of the Torah's most important "covenantal business," Nitzavim also contains some of the most significant prophecy found in the Torah. The main theme for this sidra must be "Return," based on the frequent use of the Hebrew root *shuv* - שׁוּב. This parasha also is rather easy to outline. Here it is:

- I. Israel's Return to the Lord
- II. Israel's Return to the Land
- III. Israel's Return to the Covenant
- IV. The Offer to Return

I. Return #1: Deut. 30:1–2, 6 Israel's Return to the Lord

A. The People Who Will Return

The first return described in this passage is a return of the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the Lord their God.

Moshe was speaking these words to a people who were, for the most part, walking with God. It seemed inconceivable to many of them that there would ever be a time when they or their descendants would not follow their God. Yet, all we have to do is read two books after Deuteronomy and we will see how all of Israel's troubles began. We will learn that they would fall away from God and serve other gods. Throughout Israel's history, there would be times of revival. But, for the most part, we

would be a people who would walk unfaithfully before God and neglect His Covenant, the Covenant of the Torah.

Yet, despite all of our dismal history, in these opening verses of Deuteronomy 30, the Holy One is promising that there would come a time when He would move us to follow Him once again. This time, it would be different. This time we would walk with Him until the end of the ages. We would come back to God.

B. The Time of the Return

The first verse also indicates the *time* of the return. It says, "When all of these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse..." The blessings and the curses referred to in this verse are those that are written in the preceding chapters, chapters 27 through 29. If we look at those passages we will notice that, in essence, God tells the people of Israel, "Here is the Torah. If you follow it you are going to be blessed. If you do not follow it, if you are unfaithful to the covenant, you will have continual problems and troubles."

It is intimated that those troubles would start out very mild, but they would increase in severity the longer the people of Israel were unfaithful. In actuality we have within this passage, unfortunately, a record of Israel's history. Simply stated, our fathers and we have sinned against His name! We have not been faithful to the covenant of the Lord our God. Subsequently, what is recorded in Deuteronomy, chapters 27-29, is really a tally an historical record of what our people have had to go through for covenant unfaithfulness.

But then, the storm clouds suddenly roll away. The sun comes out in Deuteronomy 30:1. God was consigned by covenant oath to inflict our people with the things described in chapters 27–29. He is also he obligated by the same oath to demonstrate mercy and grace. Somehow, in His sovereign way, in His sovereign time — without people noticing it or feeling it — He will reach down and turn our heads toward Him. We will return to the Lord our

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God. Moreover, the impetus for the return seems to be when we take to mind all of the blessings and curses that we have experienced through the centuries. For we are told at after those things, we shall return to God.

Without a doubt, the pinnacle of troubles and difficulties that the Jewish people have experienced was the Holocaust. The *Shoah*, as we call it in Israel. The flames from the holocaust still burn in the minds of many people today — not just the Jewish people, but in all of the nations of Europe and groups of people that were affected by the Holocaust. The flames died out in 1945 but the smoke is still there and the ashes are still smouldering in many people's hearts and minds. However, as horrible as the Holocaust was, according to this passage it is one of those things that God would use to turn our people to him. We are told that "it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind..." then the people of Israel will return to Him.

This has been happening — quietly, steadily and continuously — since 1945. One professor states it like this:

The unspeakable murder of six million innocents who perished just because they were Jews led the survivors to seek a better understanding of their tradition and heritage, which had almost become obliterated. The ultimate irony of the post-Nazi era is that the "Final Solution" has in fact been followed by a religious revival, a movement of *ba'alei teshuvah*—religious returnees to our faith—never before witnessed in all of Jewish history, both with regard to intensity as well as numbers."¹

In truth, since 1945, there has been an unprecedented return of Jewish people, away from secular humanism, away from cults, away from atheism, and everything else that was not of God, back to walking towards the Lord their God. Not since Biblical times has such a revival taken place among the people of Israel. We see it even in Israel today. There are young people, teenagers, college students, and

adults are turning their heads toward God and walking toward Him.

However, that is only a partial return. As great and wonderful as all of that is, it is only a partial return. During approximately this same time period, from 1945 until the present, there has been a second and more important revival among the people of Israel.

In spite of historic anti-Semitism, the relationship between Jewish people and the Messianic faith has begun to change. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Lord began moving upon the Jewish people and many became believers in Yeshua. According to some authorities, this constituted the largest number of Jewish believers since the first century.²

Never since the 1st century have more Jewish people returned to the Lord their God through Yeshua their Messiah. This is the Biblical return. And, it still continues to this day among Jewish communities all over the world. This return has not been the result of people distributing tracks, conducting evangelistic crusades, or from any of the traditional evangelistic methods. The return of Jewish people to the Lord their God has been a sovereign work of God. Yet, it was clearly predicted by Moshe here in Deuteronomy 30.

Deuteronomy 30:6 provides for us the cue that the complete spiritual return is one in which the people of Israel come to believe in Yeshua. It says that when the Jewish people return to God, He will circumcise their hearts. The language employed by Moshe here is echoed by Shaul of Tarsus in Colossians 2:11-12:

"and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

God promises to circumcise the hearts of all who trust Him. That means that He changes the relationship we have to sin. Before we were so identified with our sin that it was accurate to call us "sinners." But

in Messiah, God separates us from sin. He makes us into new creations and relegates sin to the flesh, by spiritual circumcision. It is one of the greatest miracles the Holy One accomplished when we trusted in Yeshua.

This is what God is also predicting for the Israelites who trust in Him. They did not have the complete theological understanding that Shaul gives us in Colossians. Nevertheless, it is promised that they would experience the exact same spiritual reality. In short, the promise to have their hearts circumcised can only happen because of the atoning work of Yeshua.

We cannot say when the fulfilment of this promised return to the Lord would be complete. It seems reasonable to assume that it will find its fullest expression when the Messiah returns. Perhaps the present work of God among Jewish people may be a forerunner to the fulfilment of this promise. The point, however, is not to say *when* this promised return will be fulfilled. Rather, we merely want to state what the text states ever so clearly — that God promised it *will* happen. This predicted return represents what is on the heart and mind of God.

II. Return #2: Deut. 30:3-5 Israel's Return to the Land

There is a second return promised in this passage. This is the return of the people of Israel to the Land of Israel. There are at least five aspects to this second return.

A. The Need for Restoration

If this passage speaks of a future return to the Land, it is helpful to know what caused Israel to be away from the Land to begin with. Let us look into the passage to see, if we can, what was the reason for this prediction that we would have to come back. We have just hinted at the reason above, covenant unfaithfulness. But can we know more?

Let us state the problem differently. There are many Christian scholars and preachers who say that the reason for the dispersion was because the Jewish people abrogated the Covenant when they rejected Yeshua.

Unfortunately for these misguided teachers, the text in Deuteronomy states clearly the reason why the people of Israel were dispersed from the Land. It was allurements to idolatry, the idolatry of the peoples around them.

As we have learned from past commentaries, it was not the wood and stones statutes that Israel was after — it was all of the extra attractions that came along with them. The people thought that the idols they were worshipping were gods who they could see, touch, smell, or hear. It was easier, they thought, to play religion in that way, than to trust an unseen God.

Moreover, the idolatry brought with it much pomp and fanfare in celebration of the great seasonal religious festivals dedicated to the numerous gods. These festivals were not only exciting for the children, but they were entertaining for the adults. They had lurid sacrifices, plenty of strong drink to keep them refreshed, and an ample supply of temple prostitutes with which to consort.

If Israel was attracted to idolatry for all of those reasons, what could ever prompt them to return to the unseen God, the Lord of the heavens and the earth, the God who reveals Himself to men and whose words are recorded in Scripture? Our parasha provides a clear answer to that: It would be the sovereign and merciful hand of a loving and compassionate God. It is stated in 30:3, that the Lord would again have “compassion” on the people. That is the only reason why such an unfaithful people for come back to Him.

B. Restoration From Captivity

Next, the text indicates that the Lord is promising to bring the people of Israel back from *captivity*.

This statement must have come as a shock to the Israelites, as they were listening to Moshe describe the fact that they would be scattered into many lands. Yet, if they were carefully listening to the blessing and curses taught by Moshe, they would have realised that if they or their descendants would become unfaithful to the Covenant, God would eventually remove them from the Land.

However, if they were to be removed from their Land, the Lord promised that no one else could claim ownership of the Land. Israel was designated by God to be the only lawful caretakers of the Promised Land.

We do not need to rehearse Israel's history. It is painfully all too familiar to many. They did, in fact, become unfaithful to God's covenant of Torah. Just as He promised, He consequently removed them from the Land. As a result, the people of Israel were scattered into all of the parts of the world. Consequently, the Promised Land became like a wasteland devoid of people and vegetation.

For example, when the American writer Mark Twain toured Palestine in 1867, he wrote with remorse:

Stirring scenes...occur in the valley [Jezreel] no more. There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent—not for thirty miles in either direction. There are two or three small clusters of Bedouin tents, but not a single permanent habitation...To find...the sort of solitude to make one dreary, one must come to Galilee for that...these un-peopled deserts, these rusty mounds of barrenness, that never, never, never, do shake the glare from their harsh outlines, and fade into vague perspective; that melancholy ruin of Capernaum, this stupid village of Tiberius, slumbering under six funeral palms...We reached tabor safely...We never saw a human being on the whole route...Nazareth is forlorn...Jericho the accursed lies a mouldering ruin today...Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes...desolate and unlovely...it is a dreamland.³

Yet, despite the Jewish Diaspora and its resultant desolation of their Land, we need to remember that never once did God

forsake the covenant. In fact, the dispersion and desolation are proof that the covenant is still in force. God is merely acting according to what he by covenant oath promised.

In addition, we need to remember that neither the dispersion nor the restoration is dependent on Israel's relationship to Yeshua. This fact is borne out when we examine the promise of such desolation in Deuteronomy 29: 22-26, which reads,

Now the generation to come, your sons who rise up after you and the foreigner who comes from a distant land, when they see the plagues of the land and the diseases with which the Lord has afflicted it, will say, "All its land is brimstone and salt, a burning waste, unsown and unproductive, and no grass grows in it, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and in His wrath." And all the nations shall say, "Why has the Lord done thus to this land? Why this great outburst of anger?" Then men shall say, "Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt. And they went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they have not known and whom He had not allotted to them."

The text indicates that the reason for the Jewish dispersion and subsequent desolation of the Land is not because the people of Israel have rejected Yeshua. Rather, it is because of their unfaithfulness to the Covenant of Torah, which happened long before Yeshua was incarnated.

C. Restoration of Compassion

The return of the scattered exiles, living in the *galut* (lands of our exile), is not dependant upon the merit of the people of Israel. Deuteronomy 30:3 indicates that God will bring us home out of His compassion.

The Hebrew root for "compassion," *raham* (רחם) is also the root for the word "womb." *Rahem* denotes "the strong tie God has with those whom He has called as His children."⁴ God looks upon His own as

a mother looks upon the child she has born in her womb.

It is unclear whether we should see this display of compassion by God as a result of Israel's repentance or in addition to Israel's repentance. The interpretation hinges on how the *vav* (ו) is to be understood at the beginning of verse 3. The *vav* has a wide variety of uses. It could be a simple *vav* consecutive, denoting a simple "and" or it could be used consequentially, denoting "then." In either case, we are told that at some time in Israel's future, God's love, mercy, and pity will result a marvellous display of His compassion. In compassion he will restoration of the people of Israel

D. Restoration of Occupation

The fourth thing God will do in regard to the return to the Land, is return the people of Israel will return to the *Land* of Israel, *eretz Yisrael*.

Some of the early Zionists were so convinced of the immediate necessity of a homeland for the Jewish people that they were willing to accept tracts of land elsewhere besides what was then called Palestine. Some possibilities for them were Argentina and Uganda.⁵

However, Moshe assured the people that they would be restored to the Land that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moshe said, "And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it" (30:5).

E. Restoration of Fortunes

Finally, the Lord promised that he would also restore Israel's fortunes. In other words, not only would they be brought back to their Land, but they would also experience freedom from external danger as well as receive high productivity from the soil (verses 7 and 9). "Three times in verses 5, 9, Israel is promised a new and greater prosperity than she ever has experienced."⁶

It is humbling to note in verse 7 that the Holy One would in the end, be the Defender of Israel. This is, perhaps, one of the most profound benefits of being under the covenant. The fact that although Israel has been largely unfaithful to God, He will not only restore Israel's fortunes, but He will also cause Israel's persecutors and enemies to experience the curses the Covenant people were to experience. It is as professor Kalland states, "The curses of disobedience will then fall on Israel's enemies, not on Israel herself."⁷

Beloved, this is the second return. We are not given a chronology for this return, just like we were not told when the first return is to take place. Moreover, just like the first return, there are hints that, perhaps, this second return may have already begun, though we certainly cannot be dogmatic on this point. In the late 1800's Theodore Herzl and the early Zionists had a dream. The dream was that the people of Israel could return to their homeland and possess it. Though these people were visionaries, We do not think that even in their wildest imagination, they could ever have foreseen what is now taking place in the modern State of Israel — no one could ever imagine this!

However, even if the present return of the Jewish people to our homeland is not what Moshe was predicting, nevertheless, we learn that such a return is on the heart and mind of God. That means that all believers are free to pray for both returns and to actively participate in them as the Spirit of God leads.

III. Return #3: Deut. 30:6-11

Israel's Return to the Covenant

There is a third "return" or restoration that is prevalent in this magnificent passage in Deuteronomy. Not only does God promise to bring Israel back to Himself and then back to the Land, but in this process of repentance, He also promises to return His Covenant Community back to the Covenant, back to the Torah.

According to our text, coming back to the Torah will evidence coming back to the Lord. Here is how it is stated: “You will, however, again heed the Lord and obey all His commandments that I enjoin upon you this day” (verse 8). Again, the Torah says in verse 9 that “the Lord will again delight in your well-being, as he did in that of your fathers, since you will be heeding the Lord your God and keeping His commandments and laws that are recorded in this book of the Torah.

Comparing verses 1–10 and Ezekiel 36:26–28 we are able to see God’s intention and His plan to bring His children back to the covenant that He made with their forefathers. Notice that in Ezekiel 36:27 God promises that He will put His Spirit within His children and by that Spirit *cause* those children to walk in His Torah. God Himself informs us that there will come a day when His children “will keep My judgments and do them.” God will truly do a complete spiritual work in their lives, which according to the terminology of the Brit Hadasha, means that they will be regenerated with their hearts circumcised. In short, God will make them into New Creations. Accordingly, He will move them by His Spirit to live out the Torah, which will be written on their new creation hearts.

There are many who would become quite excited about the first two returns, and rightly so. Who would not want to see the people of Israel returning to the Lord their God? Who would not praise God as an increasing amount of the descendants of Israel return to their God-given homeland? But, how many times do prophetic teachers teach that God will also cause the righteous remnant of Israel to follow the Torah? Indeed, to many evangelicals this is tantamount to becoming “under the law” again.

Yet, what are we to do with the plain meaning of the text in Deuteronomy and again in Ezekiel? Did not the Holy One say that they would “again obey the Lord, and observe all His commandments which I command you today” (Deuteronomy 30:8)?

The problem is not with the clear teaching of Deuteronomy. The problem is a theology prejudiced against following the Torah based on an erroneous understanding on the nature of the Torah.

One reason for this theological prejudice is a faulty interpretation of Romans 9:30–10:11. The reason that we cite this passage is that it quotes from our section in Deuteronomy 30, verses 11–14. In haste, some have concluded from this section of Romans that Shaul is contrasting the righteousness that comes from believing in Yeshua with the righteousness that comes from the Torah. We do not have the time nor the space here to do a detailed exegesis of Romans 9:30–10:11.⁸ Instead, let us merely establish a few important points from this passage in Romans that are pertinent to our subject.

A. *Grace Verses Legalism*

Two forms of righteousness are at the heart of the issue in Romans. But they are not two ways of possible salvation: obedience to the Torah for those in the period of the Tanakh and belief in Yeshua for these living in the present age. Rather, Shaul is contrasting a “homespun” system of righteousness with God’s righteousness that was revealed in the Torah.

Indeed, there were many Jewish people in Shaul’s day that “insisted on establishing their own righteousness rather than using the righteousness that had already been described by Moses under God in the Torah.”⁹ The issue, then, was not law verses grace or faith verses law. Rather, the issue in the passage was legalism devised by men to replace the revealed righteousness of God through grace..

B. *“Life” Does Not Always Mean “Eternal Life”*

Following the Torah does give life, as Shaul’s quotation of Leviticus 18 indicates. But we must be careful to distinguish between eternal life and physical life. Shaul

was quick to point out that God's promises were to be received by faith in Yeshua. Those promises were to be *enjoyed*, however, by living the Torah. The kind of life that was meant in Leviticus 18 as well as Deuteronomy 30 was not eternal life, but the full and meaningful life that we can experience here on earth as we walk in God's ways.

C. Messiah Is at the Core

Messiah was at the centre of it all. According to Romans 10:4, He was the goal to which the Torah aimed. It was through faith in Him that one receives judicial righteousness from God as a gift. Moreover, it is through faith in Him that there is fruitfulness and enjoyment of the blessings obtained through and by faith.

A possible theological prejudice is demonstrated when we see how Romans 10:4 is translated. Most English versions render the verse in terms typified by the NIV: "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." It is amazing how the translation of one verse can be so detached from our Hebraic roots. In this regard, notice three things:

1. "Christ" — This would always be bettered rendered "Messiah." After all, the word originated from the Hebrew *mashiach*, משיח.

b. "law" — The Greek, *vomos* (νόμος), though sometime can rightfully be rendered "law," is the most common rendering for the Hebrew word *torah* (תורה) in the LXX. Moreover, the context such as here in Romans 10, often makes it clear that it is the Torah that was intended by the author and not the theologically prejudiced word, "law." So, why not render it "Torah," as it should be rendered?

c. "end" — This word brings us closer to our point. The Greek word in question is *telos* (τέλος). While it is true that this word

can be thought of as an end to something. It is equally true that one of the main connotations of this word is that it means "purpose" or "goal."¹⁰

With these three points in mind, we can, therefore, translate Romans 10:4: "Messiah is the goal for which the Torah aims."¹¹ Thus, instead of this verse teaching that Yeshua put an end to the Torah, rendering it inoperative for believers in Yeshua, it merely informs us that the Torah finds its fullest understanding and expression in Yeshua.

Many people of Israel in Shaul's day were stumbling over Yeshua and attempting to gain God's righteous on their own. But an increasing number of gentiles were finding Yeshua and God's righteousness that is by faith. As they did, they learned what this new righteousness, which was theirs by faith, "looked like" by discovering the Scriptures of the Messiah, the Scriptures of Israel.

D. Both Moshe and Shaul Spoke of the Messiah, the Living Torah

Shaul's use of Deuteronomy 30:11–14 indicates that both He and Moshe had the same thing in mind when they spoke of the Torah being near to them and in their hearts. To both of them, Yeshua was the Living Torah. Indeed,

How could the connection have been any more clearly indicated? What will it take for modern [believers in Yeshua] to see that Moses, in the same way that the apostle Paul advocated, wanted Israel to 'believe unto righteousness' (Romans 10:10; cf. Deuteronomy 30:14)...The law cannot be properly understood unless it moves toward the grand goal of pointing the believer toward the Messiah. The law remains God's law, not Moses' law (Romans 7:22; 8:7). It is still holy, just, good, and spiritual (Romans 7:12, 14) for the Israelite as well as for the believing Gentile.¹²

If more believers would think through passages in a similar manner, they would also come to more accurate beliefs concerning the Torah. In so doing, they

would, then, be able to truly rejoice when they read such passages as Deuteronomy 30 and the promise that God would bring His people once again back into faithfulness to the Covenant of Torah. Perhaps this might, indeed, yet be the theme of some future prophetic conference!

IV. The Offer to Return 30:11-20

The second half of chapter 30 contains the elements of a gracious offer that the Lord is holding out to those who want to return to Him.

A. Not Too Difficult

First, in 30:11-14, the Holy One encourages a return by stating that the Torah, His teaching, really is not too difficult to follow — providing one is in a proper relationship with the Lord. Moshe uses rather poetic language to describe how the Torah is not out of reach: it is not in heaven nor is it in the deepest parts of the sea. It is right before us, “No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it” (30:14).

As simple as these verses sound to many ears, there are those whose understanding of them makes the Torah rather complicated. Let us explain.

These verses, 30:11-14, have become in rabbinic Judaism the basis of establishing the authority of developing halakhah (the laws governing how the Torah is to be lived out) to reside with the rabbis and their Oral Torah. Here is how the reasoning goes:

There is a famous story in the Talmud (Bava Metzia 59b) that recounts a debate that Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were having a debate on whether or not a certain over was tamei or tahor. Rabbi Eliezer, convinced that the over was ritually acceptable, was not able to persuade the other sages of his position. So, the story goes, Rabbi Eliezer called upon heavenly signs to validate his position. Each

heavenly sign happened just as Rabbi Eliezer asked for them. However, Rabbi Yehoshua and the others were not moved.

Finally, a Heavenly Voice called out declaring that Rabbi Eliezer was correct. However, and this is the important part of the story, Rabbi Yehoshua, still unconvinced, stood up and proclaimed amidst the other sages that the answer to the question is, “Not in heaven!,” alluding to our passage in Deuteronomy.

He argued that when the Torah (*both the Written Law and the Oral Law*) was given to Israel at Sinai, it was complete. From that opinion, the Torah itself became the only source for legal decisions. Even when there is a question about the law in a specific instance, the Torah itself states that the case is to be decided by a majority vote...as interpreted by the Oral Law. (italics ours)¹³

Thus, according to rabbinic Judaism, the phrase, “not in heaven,” means that we are not to look for the answers to difficulties in applying or understanding the Torah from the Lord, by prayer, etc. Rather, the rabbis through the Oral Torah shall decide these things. According to them God already gave the solution to our Biblical difficulties to the sages. It is for them to decide by majority vote on how a passage in the Torah is to be interpreted or applied.

We respectfully disagree with these sages. In doing so, we understand that this leaves us outside of the accepted definitions of being a Torah observant person, as the rabbis have defined it. In our opinion, these verses are just to encourage us to follow the Torah as the Holy One gives us wisdom to do so. We can do this because He has planted it within our new creation souls. In other words,

The positive assertion of the nearness of the revelation (v. 14) is even more specific, the word is in their mouth (they can repeat it) and in their heart (they can think it and understand ...it). Obedience is possible!¹⁴

Thus, if the Covenant is not too difficult to follow and “obedience is possible,” then why not return to the Covenant-maker and experience the joys of the Covenant?

B. Covenant Incentives

Verses 15–18 repeat again some of the incentives for covenant faithfulness and warnings for covenant unfaithfulness. We have seen similar teachings before in the Torah.

However, notice how the Lord states the incentives in verses 15 and 16. First he tells the people that He set before them life, real life. True, we believe that He is speaking of physical life here on earth and not eternal life. Eternal life comes not through Torah obedience, but through faith in the Holy One and in His Messiah. Nonetheless, God described for them what life on earth was to look like — simple faithfulness to the Word of God.

In addition, notice the command to “love” the Lord in verse 16. This is a repetition of the command to love found several times throughout this book. God speaks of our love for Him at least 14 times throughout Deuteronomy. Moreover, at least 4 times the book speaks of God’s love for His people. All of this demonstrates that the Holy One was not interested in a legalistic relationship with His people. Instead, He wants His people to know that He gave us His Torah because of His love for us and greatly desires that we love Him in return.

C. Covenant Witnesses

Finally, in verses 19 and 20, Moshe records the witness to the covenant. It is important to note that all covenants had witnesses to their conditions. Who was the Holy One going to call upon as witness for His sacred Covenants?

The text states that He called upon “heaven” and “earth.” In other words, all of the hosts of heaven, including the angels, and all of the nations of the earth were to stand as eternal witnesses to the fact that the Eternal One graciously made covenants with the people of Israel.

This served as an incentive for the Israelites to be faithful to that Covenant and also to come back to that Covenant, if

the need arises. The incentive was that they would understand that although they might be unfaithful to the Covenant, the Covenant-Maker, the Lord their God, would never be unfaithful to it because the entire universe is watching to see whether or not His is a God of His word or not.

— Appendix I —

The Newer Covenant Scriptures and The Land

How important is it that we know that God would bring Israel back to their Land? To some believers in Yeshua, who only read the Newer Covenant (NC), this promise means very little, if anything at all. Therefore, it is important that we explore for a moment what the NC says about the Land promises.

It is true that the NC does not say much about the physical Land of Israel in terms of it being a gift to Israel and part of our inheritance. However, the silence itself is an indication of what God thinks. If the covenant promise about the Land had changed, there would be something about that change in the NC. Yet, there are some passages in the NC that show that Yeshua and the writers of the Brit Hadasha believed in the importance of the promise of Land to God's people.

For example, one of the last questions which Yeshua's students asked Him before ascended from earth is recorded in Acts 1:6-8. They asked Him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

They may not have meant their question only in a “spiritual sense.” There was a physical intent in their question. Why would it be otherwise? They were Jews who were as zealous for their Land as any other Jewish person was at that time. It was only natural for them to ask the Messiah if they would receive the full sovereignty of their Land back. Accordingly, the key word here is the word “restore.” This would not make any sense if they were talking about a spiritual kingdom. When did they ever

possess such a spiritual kingdom apart from the physical one?

Yeshua's response was instructive. He did not rebuke them for their question. It was as if He agreed with them that some time in the future there would be a restoration of the physical sovereignty of Israel over their physical Land. Yeshua merely told them that they were not allowed to know the specific date when this all would happen.

Shaul of Tarsus gives us more confirmation that Israel's possession of a physical territory is still important to God. We need to look at his letter to the Roman believers for some evidence. Here we see two things.

First, Shaul tells us, "God's gifts and His call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). Certainly, one of the pre-eminent gifts from God to the people of Israel is the promise that they shall possess the physical Land of Israel as an inheritance. Moreover, to help bolster his argument, Shaul cites, in Romans 11:26-27, the famous "New Covenant" passage from Jeremiah chapter 31. If we read the context of the New Covenant passage, we will find one of the strongest affirmations anywhere in the Scriptures of Israel's continual presence on earth and their right to the Promised Land.

Since the content of most of the NC has to do mainly with theology and everyday life in a local fellowship, we are not likely to see many comments emphasizing the continuity of the promise of the Land for God's people. It is safe to say that both Yeshua and the writers of the Brit Hadasha, mostly students of Yeshua, assumed that the Promised Land was, and would continue to be throughout the generations, an important reality for God's covenant people.

— Appendix II —

The Restored Gentiles¹⁵

Throughout our study of Deuteronomy 30, we have been focusing on the restoration of the people of Israel. There is one more restoration that we want

to examine before we close out this week's commentary. However, this is not a return prophesied in Deuteronomy. Instead, we need to look at Zechariah chapter 8. Moreover, it is not a promised return of the people of Israel. Rather, this final return concerns the redeemed from among the gentiles.

"The visions and prophecies of the book of Zechariah concern themselves largely with the messages of *comfort* and *consultation* God gave in answer to the intercession of the angel of the Lord on behalf of the people of Jerusalem and Judah."¹⁶ In the midst of these messages of encouragement to Israel, Zechariah has some fascinating predictions for the remnant of believers from among the nations. Let us see how this unfolds.

Can we imagine a day when Jerusalem will be so characterized by correct teaching and sound doctrine that it will be called "the city of truth"? Can we also picture a time when the Lord Himself will dwell in Zion, seated on the throne of David? Can we envision an era when the Land of Israel will produce abundant grain and wine in total peace and security, when farmers and merchants will not have to worry about thieves and cheats stealing their products and destroying their businesses? Finally, are we able to see a day when people from all over the world will have the ability to travel to the Land of Israel without fear of terrorists or political hostilities?

Such a scene may sound impossibly perfect; however, if we read the predictions described in Zechariah 8, we will see that our description tells only half the story! This passage is replete with a description of an age of peace, security, blessing, and hope when Messiah will be King, reigning on planet Earth from the city of Jerusalem. It is a time yet to come, to be enjoyed and experienced by countless numbers of people completely dependent on the finished work of the Messiah in the past. These promises provide more than ample hope and encouragement for faithful followers to live in the present.

Let us focus, for a moment, on the last prediction of this remarkable chapter of Biblical prophecy. Of that same period, the Millennial Kingdom, verse 23 says,

ten people from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

Some unusual features of this prophecy deserve particular attention, as they carry critical implications for the body of Messiah today.

A. Ten to One

This passage foretells a time when many non-Jewish people, having heard that God is with the children of Israel in a unique way, will seek them out in order to receive a blessing. Although the word translated “people” is sometimes rendered “men,” the Hebrew itself is not gender specific; women will also participate in this search. Furthermore, the word commonly translated as “nations” literally means “tongues of the *goyim* (gentiles).” Thus, the number of gentiles seeking Jewish people will not be limited to the nations that are in the world, but will include all languages, nations and tribes as well.

Finally, although it is not possible to be dogmatic on this point, the prophet can be understood as speaking of a mathematical ratio of up to ten seeking gentiles for every Jewish believer. This is another indicator of the size of the multitude who will be called out from among the gentiles to seek the people of Israel.

B. Only Those Who Follow the Torah

These vast numbers of gentiles will not be satisfied with finding just any Israelite; they will be seeking those Jewish people who live according to the Torah.

Again, we must turn to the Hebrew for the full meaning of this point. The New American Standard Version reads, “In those days ten men from all of the nations will grasp the *garment* of a Jew....” (Italics ours). The Hebrew tells us specifically what

kind of garment the gentiles will grasp: it is called a *kanaf*, כַּנָּף. This word literally means *corner*. Why would someone want to grab the corner of another’s garment unless there was something special about that part of the clothing? It is safe to assume that where the text mentions the corner of a Jewish person’s garment, it is in reference to that person’s fringes, which were to be tied on the four corners of our garments according to Numbers 15.

Thus, the gentiles who will seek after the Jewish people are described as taking hold of the *tzitzit*, or fringes, that are part of a Torah-practicing Israelite’s clothing. In other words, Zechariah foresees a time when gentiles from all over the world will desire to attach themselves to Jewish people — specifically, those Jewish people in whose lives the Torah occupies a place of special importance.

Might we also say, therefore, that Zechariah is predicting a day when gentiles will have an insatiable desire to be identified with the Torah of God (signified by the *tzitzit*)? This will be a day when God Himself will reveal to His people (both Jewish and those in-grafted from the nations, the true nature of the Torah and its relationship to our identity in Messiah. And when, having received the revelation of our identity as new creations in Messiah, they will want to learn how it is that the Torah lifestyle is designed by God Himself to help us on a daily basis to live out our new identity in Messiah.

This prophecy makes it quite clear that when gentiles find such a Torah-observant Jewish person, the ensuing attachment will not be merely polite or casual. The word we translate as “take hold” has a root meaning of “strong,” *chazak*, חָזַק. When used as a verb, as it is in this verse, it can be rendered “to grab hold of something very tightly, or with much strength.” This represents real determination on the part of the gentiles to participate in the life that his Jewish brother is living and thus be included in the blessing that their Torah-

observant Jewish counterparts are experiencing.

Individuals from among the nations of the world, then, will be seeking the Jewish person whose Torah observance is consistent with that of the Living Torah Himself. In other words, the gentiles will seek to be closely united with Torah-observant Jewish believers in Messiah Yeshua.

The context of these great promises includes other unfathomable and glorious predictions that still await us. It is a millennial passage, finding its ultimate fulfilment in the next age — the age of Messiah's reign on earth. Having understood the contextual time of fulfilment, however, does not mean that this passage has no application for life in the body of Messiah in the here and now.

Indeed, it does seem to be predicting a wonderful restoration of non-Jewish believers to complete unity with their Jewish counterparts, both expressing their faith consistently in a Biblically Hebraic manner.

Additional Notes

¹ Benjamin Blech, *Understanding Judaism*, p. xi.

² Michael Schiffman, *Return of the Remnant*, p. 2

³ Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial*, pp. 159–160

⁴ R. Laird Harris, Gleason I. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 842.

⁵ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16, pp. 1044, 1046.

⁶ Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* ("EBC"), p. 187.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For an excellent and detailed exegesis of this passage, please see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.'s article in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*.

⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, p.184.

¹⁰, William F Arndt. and, F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by William Baur, p. 819.

¹¹ This is also how David Stern renders this verse in his helpful English translation, *The Jewish New Testament*.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 187–188.

¹³ Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Devarim*, p. 331.

¹⁴ EBC, op. cit., p. 189.

¹⁵ Much of the following material is taken from *Take Hold*, by Ariel and Devorah Berkowitz, pp. 69–73.

¹⁶ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, p.337.

Chapter 29

Verses 16–20

It seems that the subjects of these verses are those who may give the appearance of being with the covenant people, but, who, in reality, are not. These verses are not speaking about a wayward covenant person, but someone who is spiritually or even physically outside of the covenant. For him, if he does not want to be part of the covenant people and persists in his idolatry, the only possible end is separation from God, as these verses indicate.

This punishment for such an outsider is different than for someone under the covenant, yet who sins. For him the ultimate end is having his physical life removed.

Verse 28

The Masoretic text has dots over the Hebrew letters לָנוּ לְבַנִּינֵנוּ Hertz offers this explanation for this phenomenon:

This verse is one of the fifteen passages of the Bible in which words are dotted. The most probable explanation of these dots is that they were intended to call attention to important homiletical teachings in connection with the words thus dotted.¹⁷

Chapter 30

Verse 2

“return” — The Rabbis see seven stages to repentance in the seven different usages of this root שׁוּב. According to Nachshoni,

At first, the teshuvah is not complete, and as a result, HaShem's reward for it is not complete as well. Then the teshuvah improves, eventually reaching perfection.”¹⁸

We do not hold to this viewpoint. But we thought it important to understand the traditional Jewish concept of repentance.

Verses 2 ff.

What is first: Teshuvah or Geulah? The oft-asked question about these verses is: What happens first, the repentance of Israel or the redemption of Israel? Spating it in more Hebraic terminology, we have *teshuvah* – תשובה (repentance) or *geulah* – גאולה (redemption)? In other words, will God first redeem Israel, causing them to return? Or, will Israel first return which will be followed by God reciprocating in redeeming them?

This is not an easy question to answer. Even the sages had a difficult time with I, as we can see from this citation of a Talmudic story by Leibowitz.

Rabbi Nathan stated: “Repentance is great since it brings redemption nearer”...Eliezar stated: “Repentance is great because it follows immediately after redemption...”¹⁹

The text itself seems to place God's actions following Israel's repentance. However, on the other hand, it also begins by saying that Israel would repent after, or as a result of, the suffering because of the covenant curses. In fact, we read in verse 1, “it will be, that when all these things come upon you, then you will take it to heart...” Is it possible to suggest that God's action toward Israel came first in the form of the tribulation in the dispersion? This

was, in a sense, God's “voice” calling out to a wayward Israel, “Come back!” Israel would follow by turning, being met by God Who was there all along to redeem them from those troubles and bring them back to the Land and to Him.

One other theological element needs to be taken into consideration. Based on the clear teaching from the Brit Hadasha, it seems that God always initiates any action taken in the relationship between God and man.

Verse 3

“turn your captivity” — Several commentators are quick to point out the Talmud's comment on this phrase. They note that the Talmud renders it, “And the Lord your God will return with your captivity.” That is, “When Israel was in exile. God was, so to speak, in exile along with her.”²⁰

Study Questions

1. Based on the words of the text, what would you say is the theme of this parasha? Why?
2. What reason does the Torah give for the woes and curses that have come upon Israel?
3. What reason have many Christians given over the years for Israel's troubles? How can you refute this assertion?
4. What effect does God intend the curses to have on the people of Israel? Have they happened yet? Explain.
5. Along with a promised return to Himself, What is the second kind of return promised in this passage?

¹⁷ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, p. 889

¹⁸ Yehudah, Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: Devarim*, p. 1381.

¹⁹ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim*, p. 320.

²⁰ Hertz, op. cit., p. H 880.

6. Why is it important for believers in Yeshua to know about and believe in the return to the Land?
7. What does the Brit Hadasha teach about the Land promises?
8. What is the third return predicted in this parasha?
9. How does God make it possible for people to follow the Torah?
10. What are some reasons that many believers in Yeshua fail to appreciate the prophecies in this parasha?
11. Go through each use of the word "return" and see if you can either refute or confirm the seven-stage theory described by Nachshoni.
12. Which comes first, repentance or redemption? Explain.
13. What is meant by the phrase "not in heaven?" How do the rabbis understand this phrase? How do you understand it?
14. Why do you think witnesses are necessary *for* the covenant? What are the witnesses to the covenant?

End Notes