

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

IF YOU WERE G-D By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

If You Were G-d is a tour-de-force pamphlet by the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. Kaplan demonstrates with his signature clarity and reasonableness that it was not at all odd of G-d to choose the Jews; rather, this was the optimal strategy for spreading His ideals throughout humanity, and would be adopted by any omnipotent and omniscient divinity. Put yourself in G-d's place, and the Torah comes out exactly the same.

One can resist Kaplan's magnetic literary intellect only by having experienced the likes of Bertrand Russell and (*lehavdil*/mutatis mutandum) Isaac Asimov, or by wondering whether G-d's strategy ought to be so readily comprehensible.

The exercise has value nonetheless. So: if you were G-d, and had already chosen the Jews, and they were not living up to Your hopes or expectations, what would You do?

Let's consider G-d's options in the context of this week's haftorah, Yechezkel 36:16-38.

Yechezkel is in the Babylonian exile. In other words, G-d has evicted the Children of Israel from the Land of Israel which He had granted them. This was punishment for their egregious violations of the most severe prohibitions in the Torah, including idolatry, adultery, and murder.

You might consider wiping the Jews out and starting over, perhaps from Yechezkel's children in order to maintain genetic continuity with promises You made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. But Mosheh Rabbeinu pointed out the flaw in that strategy. You are already identified with the Jews to the point that no one will believe that Your only consideration in destroying them was retributive justice. Rather, they will say that G-d was unable to keep His promises to them.

Mosheh Rabbeinu's argument had a subtext. It's not just a question of whether G-d had the temporal power to sustain His people in the desert and enable them to conquer the immediately previous conquerors of the Land of Canaan. By destroying the Jewish people, G-d would admit that He could not sustain a satisfactory relationship with them despite all His demonstrations of benevolence and power. Any subsequent relationship with a perfectly obedient nation would be sneered at as a Stepford marriage.

You might hope that the experience of exile would change the Jews' attitude. But this might be just another fantasy of deterrence through power. Deterrence through power

sometimes lowers the odds of other people doing bad things to you, but it is never absolute. That's not how human psychology works.

So You can't break the relationship, at least not permanently; You can't repair it by force; and You can't repair it via benevolence. What can You do?

The haftorah spells out this dilemma. Exiling the Jews is a desecration of G-d's Name, because the nations among whom we are exiled will say that He could not protect them. If the Jews behave well in exile, that increases the desecration, because now He has no excuse for having failed to protect them. But if the Jews behave badly, that also increases the desecration, because either the host nations will assume that He stands for bad behavior, or else, they will see how badly the relationship has failed. (At some point, perhaps they will also see His failure to destroy them as nepotistic injustice?)

Perhaps You could try the Stepford Wives solution. Don't perceptibly destroy the Jews, just change their being!

That would be a deeply cynical reading of Yechezkel 36:26-27.

וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חַדְשָׁה אֶתֵּן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם
וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת־לֵב הָאֲבָן מִבְּשָׂרְכֶם וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב בָּשָׂר׃
וְאֶת־רוּחִי אֶתֵּן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם
וְעָשִׂיתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־בְּהַקְלִי מַלְכוּ וּמִשְׁפָּטֵי תִשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם׃

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit will I place in your midst

I will remove the stone heart from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh.

I will place My spirit in your midst;

I will make it so that you walk within My rules and guard and act in accordance with My laws.

Abravanel tries desperately to avoid this implication. Here is Abravanel:

So that they would not return to sin again,
He will place a new heart and a new spirit within them.
This alludes to the straightening of desires and the rule of the intellect;
and regarding the nullification of the evil inclination, He said:
I will remove the stone heart for your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh,
meaning submissive and subordinate to the intellect, not hard as stone.
The intention of this prediction is not to remove choice and contingency

and that humans will be compelled in their actions,
rather that the Holy Blessed One will perform such wondrous
deeds visible to them
that they will be panicked/*yifchadu* toward Hashem and His
good

and there will be in them no tendency toward physical desires,
rather toward perfection,
just as in Adam the First before his sin.

But when it says afterward *and I will place My spirit in your
midst* –

this alludes to the spirit of prophecy that will manifest in that
time in those ready for it.

This testifies that this prophecy is about the future and was not
fulfilled in the Second Temple

because they did not have prophecy among them . . .

I confess that references to Adam the First-ness as a state
immune to sin always baffle me. But my focus for now is on
Abravanel's assertion that this prophecy **has not yet
happened**. Why not, if it is the correct strategy?

Also: Do you think Abravanel successfully explains how G-d
will maintain His relationship with the Jewish people and yet
escape the cycle of sin and retribution? Does he explain why G-
d did not adopt this strategy for the Second Temple?

Malbim builds off Abravanel, as he often does. His opening
comment on the haftorah states that

This section (beginning verse 16) comes to explain his prior
words,
which indicated that the Redemption of Cyrus would not be
eternal.

But if restoring the Jews to Israel will not break the cycle,
what is the point of the promised next Redemption?

Why would he exile them and then revert and gather them?

Malbim explains that during the Second Temple, when *The
House of Israel dwelled on their ground – and they made it
tamei through their ways and actions* –

nonetheless I did not drive them away from My presence,
rather *like the tum'ah of a niddah was their way before Me* –
just as the niddah's husband separates from her while she
menstruates

but awaits her becoming *tehorah*, when he will return to her,
so also their way; I looked forward to their becoming *tahor*
from their *tumah* so I would return to them. . .

G-d continually hoped for this *tabarah*, but it never really
happened. Instead, his continuing relationship with the Jews –
albeit without intimacy – led to constant desecration of His
name among the people of the world.

*I judged them in accordance with their ways and deeds . . .
He came to the nations to which they had come –*

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

G-d came with them into exile to supervise so that their
punishment would be to the measure of their sin and tailored, so
that they would recognize that it was providential,
but **as a result they** (the other nations) *desecrated my holy
Name =*

seeing that G-d's providence was still with the Jews, that He
had not abandoned them even in the lands of their enemies to
destruction, so *why had they left His land?* Why hadn't He
returned them to His land, the ideal place for providence? It must
be *because of His inability . . .*

To end this constant desecration,

I had mercy on My holy Name

which the Children of Israel had desecrated via their evil deeds,
which made it necessary to punish them time after time,
with the Name of Heaven being desecrated anew each time.

Therefore . . . not for your sake . . .

because were I acting for your sake, it would depend on virtue
and guilt,

and when they sinned again, He would exile them again.

But since He is not doing it for their sake but rather for the
honor of His desecrated Name -

He is compelled to make it so that they will not sin again,
and so He won't need to exile them again, and His Name will
not be desecrated time after time . . .

and this (He will accomplish) by forcing them to repent

Malbim's conclusion utterly fails to explain why G-d did not
adopt this strategy during the Second Temple. Moreover,
“forcing them to repent” a way of evading the real issue, which
is whether G-d and the nation of Jewish human beings can have
a successful and mutually satisfying relationship.

If you were G-d, I suspect You would regard Abravanel and
Malbim as counsels of despair, not solutions. Instead of
implementing them, you would continue tinkering with the
formula of intimacy and distance in the hope of finding a balance
that works at least for a time, because the temporary experience
of a love given freely is worth more than an eternity of
compelled worship.

The belief that the current Jewish return from exile is
necessarily and inevitably permanent is a counsel of despair. It
assumes that G-d has given up on the Jewish people, and that at
some point soon He will transform our natures or compel our
repentance. I'd rather believe that we remain in a genuine
relationship whose outcomes depend on our actions. I hope and
believe that G-d wants that as well.

Shabbat shalom!