

Parashat Behar - Bechukotai 5775, 2015:

And in the Time of the Mashiach (Messiah)

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

“... I will remove wild beasts from the Land ...”

(*Sefer Vayikra, Parashat Bechukotai*, 26:6, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The halachic Midrash to *Sefer Vayikra*, known as the “*Sifra*,” presents two very different interpretations of our *pasuk* (verse):

Rabbi Yehudah said: “[Hashem] will remove them [the wild and dangerous beasts] from the world. Rabbi Shimon said: “[Hashem] will control them [the wild beasts] so they will no longer cause injury.” Rabbi Shimon [also] said: “When is there the greatest praise to the Omnipresent One – when there are no injurious creatures or when there are dangerous creatures that no longer cause injury? One must say that [Hashem’s praise is most clearly manifest] when there are injurious creatures that no longer cause any damages. (*Parashat Bechukotai* 1:2:1, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, Rabbi Yehudah maintains that Hashem will ultimately remove the wild and dangerous animals from the world so that they will no longer pose any threat to mankind.

In contrast, Rabbi Shimon asserts that the Almighty will keep the world’s ecological structure intact. He will, however, alter the nature of the heretofore-dangerous animals so that they will live peacefully with the rest of the animal kingdom, and mankind. The *Sifra* clearly supports Rabbi Shimon’s opinion, since it continues with Yeshayahu’s best-known verses:

And a wolf shall live with a lamb, and a leopard shall lie with a kid; and a calf and a lion cub and a fatling [shall lie] together, and a small child shall lead them. And a cow and a

bear shall graze together, their children shall lie; and a lion, like cattle, shall eat straw. And an infant shall play over the hole of an old snake and over the eyeball of an adder, a weaned child shall stretch forth his hand. (*Sefer Yeshayahu*, 11:6-8)

While the *Sifra*, and other *Midrashim* (such as *Pesikta Zutarta*, *Parashat Bechukotai* 26:6), incontrovertibly support Rabbi Shimon's view that Hashem will literally alter the nature of dangerous carnivorous animals, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) most assuredly did not. Instead, he viewed the verses in *Yeshayahu*, and similar passages from in the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), as metaphoric pronouncements of the Messianic Age:

Do not presume that in the Messianic age any facet of the world's nature will change or there will be innovations in the work of creation. Rather, the world will continue according to its pattern. Although Isaiah 11:6 states: "The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat," these words are a metaphor and a parable. The interpretation of the prophecy is as follows: Israel will dwell securely together with the wicked gentiles who are likened to a wolf and a leopard, as in the prophecy Jeremiah 5:6: "A wolf from the wilderness shall spoil them and a leopard will stalk their cities." They will all return to the true faith and no longer steal or destroy. Rather, they will eat permitted food at peace with Israel as Isaiah 11:7 states: "The lion will eat straw like an ox." Similarly, other Messianic prophecies of this nature are metaphors. In the Messianic era, everyone will realize which matters were implied by these metaphors and which allusions they contained. (*Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Shoftim*, *Hilchot Melachim* 12:1, this, and all *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabi Eliyahu Touger, underlining my own)

The Ra'avad (Rabbi Avraham ben David, c. 1125-1198) pointedly took the Rambam to task for stating that such passages from the Prophets were mere metaphors and parables. After all, he contended, did not the Torah explicitly state: "I will remove wild beasts from the Land?" If so, how is possible to imagine that the Prophets' words were mere allegories?

Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch *shlita*, the contemporary Israeli *posek*, and former Chief Rabbi *Ra'avad* of the *Edah HaChareidit* in Jerusalem, suggests that the crux of the *machloket* (argument) between the Rambam and the Ra'avad is to be found in their respective analyses of our *pasuk* (verse), "I will remove wild beasts from the Land." In Rav Sternbuch's view, Maimonides maintained that the Messianic times will be a period

wherein “the wild beasts will no longer be able to do harm to mankind.” This, Rav Sternbuch suggests, “is not a change in nature, [since it is inexplicit] rather than manifestly evident to one and all.” In contrast, he asserts that the Ra’avad championed the view of Rabbi Yehudah, as found in our above-cited *Sifra*. Therefore, “I will remove wild beasts from the Land” is to be taken literally, “this means there will longer be any vicious animals.” In other words, vicious and carnivorous beasts will simply cease to exist. (*Sefer Ta’am v’Da’at, Parashat Bechukotai, 26:6*).

Given our Sages ongoing analysis as to the correct meaning of our *pasuk*, it is manifestly evident that, throughout history, our people have longed for the coming of the *Mashiach* (Messiah). How will we know, however, whether or not the *Mashiach* has finally arrived? Here, too, we are fortunate in that we can turn to the Rambam for an answer to this crucial question:

King Messiah will arise in the future and return the kingship of David to its former greatness and glory. He will rebuild the Holy Temple and gather all of the exiles to the Land of Israel. All of the laws will be in effect during his days just as they were in earlier times. We will [once again] offer *korbanot* (animal offerings) and keep the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years just like all of the other laws stated in the Torah. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 11:1*)

Yet, how will we know that the individual who accomplishes each of these holy tasks is indisputably the one and only Messiah? A few *halachot* later, Maimonides provides us with the following answer:

If a king will arise from the House of David, who, like his ancestor David, diligently contemplates the Torah and observes its *mitzvot* as prescribed by the Written Law and the Oral Law, and will compel all of Israel to walk in (the way of the Torah) and rectify the breaches in its observance, and fight the wars of G-d, we may, with assurance, consider him *Mashiach*. If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Mashiach. (11:4, underlining and emendations my own)

One of our tasks as *ovdei Hashem* (servants of Hashem) is to be an *or l'amim* (light unto the nations, *Sefer Yeshayahu* 49:6). Little wonder, then, that our hopes and desires for the imminent coming of *Mashiach* are universalistic ones that encompass a vision of peace for all mankind. Thus the Rambam teaches us in the concluding words of his passage:

He will then improve the entire world, motivating all the nations to serve G-d together, as *Sefer Tzephaniah* 3:9 states: "I will transform the peoples to a purer language that they all will call upon the name of G-d and serve Him with one purpose."

Then, the famous words of Zechariah the prophet will be realized and ring throughout the entire world: "And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one." (14:9) May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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