

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Bechukosai

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Ben Yechezkel *ben* Mordechai *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Getting Rid of *Chametz* – and Wild Animals

Terms and Definitions

One of the ways through which *chametz* (leaven) at Pesach time is eliminated from its owner's possession is the through the process known as “*bitul* (nullification of) *chametz*.” In a very basic sense, this is a “mental” process; by considering the *chametz* to be as nothing – “like dust of the earth” – it is rendered as such (in the *halachic* sense). Thus, having reduced the leavened matter to a valueless entity (in one's own eyes), one has essentially devolved himself of its presence. On a Biblical level, at least, he thereby avoids the prohibition of possessing *chametz* during Pesach.

Rashi (*Pesachim 4b*) provides more background for this curious method. The notion of *בְּיטוּל הַמֶּזֶץ* derived from the verse in parshas Bo containing the commandment of *chametz* removal. The Torah employs the term *תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ* (get rid of) – rendered by the Targum as *תִּבְטְלוּ* (same root as *בְּיטוּל*). Rashi notes that the Torah did not choose the word *תִּבְעֲרוּ* – destroy – which would have carried a more overt implication of physical destruction. By opting merely for *תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ*, the Torah conveys that this “softer” method – which can be accomplished in one's mind – is sufficient.

One potential problem with this approach, however, is that it seems to be contradicted by a verse from this week's *parshah*. R' Isser Zalman Meltzer (*Even Ha'azel, Hilchos Chametz U'matzah, 2:1*) points to the section describing the idyllic situation B'nei Yisrael will experience in their Land if they adhere to Hashem's commandments. Amongst the blessings listed there we find the following: *וְהִשְׁבִּיתִי חַיָּה רָעָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ* – “And I will remove wild animals from the Land” (*Vayikra 26:6*). *וְהִשְׁבִּיתִי*, of course, shares a root with *תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ* of the *chametz* directive. The rendering of the Targum is likewise the same, as *וְהִשְׁבִּיתִי* is translated as *וְאִבְטַל*. The only problem is that this verse is obviously not talking in just the “mental” sense, but of an actual physical removal of the animals. (Try convincing yourself that a charging rhino is really “nothing”!)

In short, this seems to be a clear indication that *בְּיטוּל / תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ* entails a real, physical act, not just a mindset. How would Rashi resolve this issue?

The *sefer Mishchas Shemen* (§164) sheds much light on the issue. He makes the point that the verse in question merely states that the threatening animals will be neutralized; it doesn't necessarily state *how* exactly this will be accomplished.

Peaceful Coexistence

He elaborates: Apparently, this idea is actually a matter of dispute in the Medrash (*Toras Kohanim on Vayikra 26:6*). R' Yehudah does interpret the animal removal mentioned in the verse in an absolutist sense – i.e., removal from existence, to be extirpated from the Land. R' Shimon, on the other hand, understands differently. The animals themselves will not disappear; rather, their destructive tendencies will simply shut down. They will still be around, but in a more harmless capacity.

The Rogatchover (*Tzafnas Pa'anei'ach*) observes a connection between the animal issue and the injunction of *chametz* removal. Apparently, R' Yehudah's statement in the Medrash is consistent with his stated opinion regarding *chametz*, recorded in the Mishnah in Pesachim (2:1):

רבי יהודה אומר, אין בעור תימז אלא שרפה.

“R' Yehudah says: Disposal of *chametz* can be achieved only through (actual) burning.”

Thus, we see that R' Yehudah requires that *chametz* removal be accomplished through complete, physical means. Obviously, he understood the *והשבתי* term of the *chametz* directive to mean real destruction. Similarly – remarks the Rogatchover – he interpreted the word as found in our *parshah* in the same way: *והשבתי תיה רעה* refers to the animals' extinction in the Land.

But there is another viable rendering of this term. R' Shimon (in the Medrash) held that the physical existence of the animals was not threatened; *והשבתי תיה רעה* merely meant that they would calm down a bit. Recall (from the Targum) that this term is interchangeable with *ביטול*. Thus, we have a bona-fide opinion contending that *ביטול* need not refer to physical destruction (in dispute with R' Yehudah). It would seem that this was Rashi's source when he interpreted *ביטול* as a mere mental exercise.

Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

This notion – of the wild animals discarding their harmful propensities – may not be as “wild” as it might at first seem. This is substantiated from the noteworthy continuation of R' Shimon's opinion in the Medrash. He proceeds to quote the well-known passage in the Navi, referring to the Messianic Era:

“And the wolf will dwell with the sheep; the lion will lie down next to the kid; the calf, the lion cub and fattened livestock will coexist... and the cow and the bear will graze together...” (*Yeshayah 11:6*).

Commenting in our *parshah*, the Ramban explains that the pastoral vision above is a reflection of our verse *והשבתי תיה רעה מן הארץ*. The original, pristine nature of all animals – current carnivores included – is to be a vegetarian. “Behold, I have given to you... and to all animals... all vegetation of the field, as food” (*Bereishis 1:29,30*). One of the pernicious outgrowths of Adam Harishon's sin was that the world in general was negatively affected; one manifestation was in the nature of animals, many of whom turned to predation. In describing the idyllic situation B'nei Yisrael were to encounter in their Land (if they would fulfill the commandments), the Torah states that nature would revert to what it once was before Adam's sin. As such, lions would eat grass, not people.

And such is the promise of the future Messianic Era. The Sages' sentiment that “In the Messianic era, the world will function according to its natural way” is laden with significance; they refer to the conduct of the world at its inception – before Adam's sin (*cf. Maharal, Netzach Yisrael, ch. 50*). Thus, the animals will revert to their true natures – peaceful vegetarians – and no longer pose a danger.