

# Torah Table Talk

## Jeremiah's Prayer: Two Meanings for Redemption

### Parshat Bahar

Leviticus 25:1 – 26:2/ Jeremiah 32:6 – 27



In the tenth year of King Zedekiah's reign, around 587 BCE, Jeremiah saw "the writing on the wall." The Babylonians had laid siege to Jerusalem and the prophet understood that it was only a matter of time before the city fell and the people were exiled from their land. When Jeremiah suggested that the people make a treaty with the Babylonians, the king reacted with outrage and anger. He considered Jeremiah a traitor. The prophet was thrown in jail, though he was still allowed visitors.

While serving his sentence Jeremiah arranged to purchase a parcel of land from his cousin, Hanamel. This act was both legal and symbolic; it was meant to show the nation that Jeremiah still had faith in the future. After all, why buy a worthless parcel of land in a nation that is about to be vanquished, unless you believe that the people will one day return to rebuild their homes, replant their fields, and prune their vineyards. Jeremiah's act of 'redemption' was meant to provide hope for the future. Parshat Bahar deals with the relationship of the land to the Jewish people and to God. Israel is told: "The land must not be sold beyond reclaim for the land is mine; you are but strangers, resident with Me." (Jeremiah 25:32) That relationship continued even in times of disaster.

#### **Jeremiah 32:8, 17 - 25**

(Hanamel said to Jeremiah :) "Please buy my land in Anathoth...for the right of succession is yours and you have the duty of redemption."

I prayed to the Lord: "Ah Lord God! Behold, you have made the heaven and the earth by your great power and by your stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for you ...Who set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, even to this day, and in Israel, and among mankind; and you have made a name for yourself, as at this day; And have brought forth your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs, and with wonders, and with a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with great terror; and you have given them this land, which you swore to their fathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey. They came in, and possessed it; but they obeyed not your voice, nor walked in your Torah; they have done nothing of all that you commanded them to do; therefore you have caused all this evil to come upon them. Behold the siege works, they have come to the city to take it; and the city is given to the hand of the Chaldeans, who fight against it, because of the sword, and of the famine, and of the pestilence; and what you have spoken has come to pass; and, behold, you see it. And you have said to me, O Lord God, Buy the field for money, and take witnesses; though the city is given to the hand of the Chaldeans.

#### **Leviticus 25: 23 – 26**

The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the land of your possession you shall grant redemption (*ge'ulah*) for the land. If your brother becomes poor, and has sold away some of his possession, and if any of his kin comes to redeem (*go'alo*) it, then shall he redeem (*ga'al*) that which his brother sold. And if the man has none to redeem it, and himself is able to redeem it...

#### **Siddur: Traditional Prayer Book**

Behold our adversity, and take up our grievance, and redeem (*ugi'aleynu*) us speedily for Your Name's sake for you are a powerful Redeemer (*go'el*). Blessed are you, Adonai, Redeemer (*go'el*) of Israel.

#### **Babylonian Talmud Megillah 17b**

What was their reason for mentioning redemption in the seventh blessing (of the Amidah)? Raba replied: Because they (Israel) are destined to be redeemed in the seventh year (of the coming of the Messiah,) therefore the mention of redemption was placed in the seventh blessing. But a Master has said, 'In the sixth year will be thunders, in the seventh wars, at the end of the seventh the son of David will come'? — War is also the beginning of redemption.

## **Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97b**

Rav said: All times set for redemption have passed, and the matter now depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Samuel said: To endure the experience of mourning is sufficient punishment for the mourner [for the people of Israel].

How redemption is to come about is also disputed among the sages. For R. Eliezer said: If Israel repent, they will be redeemed; but if not, they will not. R. Joshua retorted: You say they will not be redeemed if they do not repent. On the contrary, they will be redeemed, for the Holy One will raise up against them a king whose decrees will be as cruel as Haman's, so that Israel will be driven to repentance, and thus He will bring them back to the right path.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Why was it necessary for the prophet Jeremiah to redeem his cousin's land? How was this a responsibility and to what extent was it an opportunity?
2. In the sources above the word *Geulah*, redemption, is used in two different ways. To redeem is to retrieve land that belongs to one's family through purchase. Since a land in Israel was given to the families that arrived from the land of Egypt, each person had a right to 'redeem' his ancestral land. To redeem also means to save a person from oppression and trouble; thus, God 'redeemed Israel from slavery.' What is the connection between these two uses of the same word? Is there one?
3. How does Jeremiah connect these two concepts of redemption? What is the significance of his redemption of his cousins land in light of the events that are about to take place in Judah?
4. When we speak of Redemption and the coming of the Messiah what do we mean? What role do we play in bringing about redemption? How did Jeremiah set a precedent for future Zionists? To what extent is redemption dependent on us and to what extent is it brought about through God's intervention in our lives?
5. Is *Geulah*, redemption, a personal concept or is it a purely nationalistic concept? Do we believe in the redemption of the individual? Can I be redeemed by God? If so, in what way?

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