

Message from the Parsha

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Challenge & Self Worth

In this week's parsha, following a brief overview of the blessings we will merit if we observe the mitzvot, the Torah describes what God has in store for the Jewish people should they diverge from the ways of the Torah. This litany of condemnations, known colloquially as the TOCHACHA, 'rebuke', fills the first half of Parshat B'chukotai, spelling out the many forms of suffering that would be visited upon the Jews were they to turn away from God. Reading these verses may well leave some of us overwhelmed, fearful, and depressed - which is why in many communities they are traditionally read in an undertone.

Yet the real puzzle of the parsha is what follows. With the TOCHACHA finished, ostensibly finishing off Sefer Vayikra, the Torah shifts gears to discuss the mitzva of ARACHIN: when a person vows to donate to the Beit HaMikdash the value of himself or another person. The Torah then presents a "price index" for how much one would owe, based on the age and gender of the person whose equivalent worth was dedicated.

What does the mitzva of Arachin, a method for making monetary donations to the Beit HaMikdash, have to do with the TOCHACHA? In what way are these two components of our parsha connected?

A teaching attributed to the Kotzker Rebbe offers profound insight into this juxtaposition. Upon reading about, and all the more so, upon experiencing the horrors described in the passages of the TOCHACHA, we may find ourselves calling into question our very worth as people. Of what value is the life of any person in the face of the possibility of remarkable failure in the eyes of God or immeasurable loss and suffering here on earth? As the inevitable depression strikes in the face of communal tragedy - much like what we experienced in the wake of October 7th - as well as when personal setbacks occur, we may begin to ask ourselves: Are we worth anything at all?

And it is here, at this very juncture, that the Torah instructs the Jewish people on the mitzva of Arachin, the commandment that declares in full voice that each and every one of us holds value. This section reaffirms how every person, created in the divine image, is worth something. Our intrinsic value, the Kotzker Rebbe teaches, can never be taken away, and must inspire us to pave a way forwards - even in our most trying times.

This idea is highlighted in the Midrash Tanchuma (Buber ed. B'chukotai #6) in its interpretation of the verse from T'hilim (89:7), "For who in the heavens is comparable to God?" The term for "comparable", YAARUCH, is read by our rabbis as a reference to ARACHIN, in

which we consecrate the worth of a person.

It is God who turns to the angels, insisting that even for all their sanctity, their worship is less cherished by Him than that of humans on earth. For the Torah is designed for humans - beings who have parents and children, who hunger and thirst, who feel jealousy and anger. Beings who must sometimes fight lonely wars to root out evil; who have the capacity to lose their sense of self-worth, yet who also hold within their hearts the remarkable capacity to regain it.

It is we, the humans who bring the offerings of Arachin, who insist upon our dignity, and are cherished by the Almighty, even in the face of incomprehensible tragedy and struggle. This is how we have survived so many calamities as a people and struggles as individuals. It is our intrinsic inner value that enables us to persevere, both as a community and as individuals.