



Va'etchanan

STRUGGLE ISN'T A BUG. IT'S A FEATURE.

Reframing Negativity Isn't Only about Looking to the Future.

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Va'etchanan

Moses tells the people of Israel how he implored G-d to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, but G-d refused, instructing him instead to ascend a mountain and see the Promised Land.

Continuing his “review of the Torah,” Moses describes the Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah, declaring them unprecedented events in human history. “Has there ever occurred this great thing, or has the likes of it ever been heard? Did ever a people hear the voice of G-d speaking out of the midst of the fire . . . and live? . . . You were shown to know that the L-rd is G-d; . . . there is none else besides Him.”

Moses predicts that in future generations, the people will turn away from G-d, worship idols, and be exiled from their land and scattered among the nations; but from there, they will seek G-d and return to obey His commandments.

Our *parshah* also includes a repetition of the Ten Commandments and the verses of the Shema, which declare the fundamentals of the Jewish faith: the unity of G-d (“Hear O Israel: the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is one”); the *mitzvot* to love G-d, to study His Torah, to bind “these words” as *tefilin* on our arms and heads, and to inscribe them in the *mezuzot*

affixed on the doorposts of our homes.

QUESTION

Imagine you had to choose a metaphor to frame personal struggle in a positive light. What metaphor would you choose?

The 9th of Av



TEXT 1A

Isaiah 40:1–2

א. נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

ב. דַּבְּרוּ עַל לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַם וְקִרְאוּ אֵלֶיהָ, כִּי מְלֵאָה
צָבָאָה כִּי נִרְצָה עֲוֹנָהּ, כִּי לָקְחָה מִיַּד ה' כָּפָלִים בְּכָל
חַטָּאתֶיהָ.

1. [G-d tells Isaiah:] “Comfort, yes, comfort My people.

2. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and call to her, that she will become full from her host [i.e., returning exiles], for her sin has been appeased, for she has received double [punishment] from G-d for all her sins.”



A double comfort.

“Comfort, yes,
comfort my people.”

TEXT 1B

Midrash, Eichah Rabah
1:57

לקו בכפליים, דכתיב: "כי לקחה מיד ה' כפליים
בכל חטאותיה", ומתנחמים בכפליים, דכתיב:
"נחמו נחמו עמי יאמר אלוקיכם".

The Jews were doubly punished and, in
turn, were doubly comforted.

QUESTION

It seems as though every struggle has two parts that need to be addressed by a double-comfort exercise. Why?

TEXT 2

Talmud, Makot 24a–b

רבן גמליאל ורבי אלעזר בן עזריה ורבי יהושע
ורבי עקיבא . . . היו עולין לירושלים. כיון שהגיעו
להר הצופים קרעו בגדיהם. כיון שהגיעו להר
הבית, ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי הקדשים.

התחילו הן בוכין, ורבי עקיבא מצחק.

אמרו לו: מפני מה אתה מצחק?

אמר להם: מפני מה אתם בוכים?

אמרו לו: מקום שכתוב בו "והזר הקרב יומת"
ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו, ולא נבכה?

One time, Rabbis Gamliel, Elazar, Yehoshua, and Akiva were ascending to Jerusalem [after the destruction of the Temple]. When they arrived at Mount Scopus [and saw the site of the Temple], they rent their garments in mourning. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the site of the Holy of Holies.

They began to weep, and Rabbi Akiva began to laugh.

They said to him, "Why are you laughing?"

Rabbi Akiva said to them, "Why are you weeping?"

They said to him, "This is the place concerning which it is written, 'And the non-priest who approaches shall die' (Numbers 1:51). Yet now foxes walk in it. Should we not weep?"

TEXT 3A

Isaiah 8:1-2

א. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי, קַח לְךָ גְּלוּיֹן גָּדוֹל וּכְתַב עָלָיו
בְּחָרָט אֶנּוּשׁ לְמַהֵר שְׁלַל חָשׁ בָּז.

ב. וְאֶעֱיֵדָה לִי עֲדִים נֶאֱמָנִים אֶת אִירְיָה הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶת
זִכְרְיָהוּ בֶן יֶבְרֶכְיָהוּ.

1. G-d said to me, “Take a large scroll and write on it in clear script: ‘Plunder hastens, spoil quickens.’

2. “And I will call to testify for Myself trustworthy witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah.”

Uriah



Zechariah



TEXT 3B

Micah 3:12

לְכֵן בְּגִלְלָכֶם צִיּוֹן שָׂדֵה תִּתְּרַשׁ, וִירוּשָׁלַם עֵיִן תִּהְיֶה,
וְהָר הַבַּיִת לְבָמוֹת יָעָר.

Because of you [the Jewish people's sins],
Zion shall be plowed as a field, and
Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins,
and the Temple Mount a shrine in the
woods.

TEXT 3C

Zechariah 8:4-5

ד. כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת, עַד יָשְׁבוּ זָקְנִים וְזָקֵנוֹת
בְּרֹחֲבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם, וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעָנָתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מִרְבַּ יָּמִים.

ה. וּרְחֲבוֹת הָעִיר יִמָּלְאוּ יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת מְשַׁחֲקִים
בְּרֹחֲבֹתֶיהָ.

4. So says G-d, “There will [come a time when] old men and women will sit in the squares of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age.

5. “And the city squares will be crowded with boys and girls playing.”

QUESTION

What was Isaiah intimating by calling Uriah and Zechariah together as witnesses to his documentation of Jerusalem's impending downfall?

TEXT 4

Talmud, Makot 24a–b

אמר להן: לכך אני מצחק, דכתיב: "ואעידה לי
עדים נאמנים את אוריה הכהן ואת זכריה בן
יברכיהו". וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה? אוריה
במקדש ראשון, וזכריה במקדש שני?

אלא תלה הכתוב נבואתו של זכריה בנבואתו של
אוריה. באוריה כתיב: "לכן בגללכם ציון שדה
תחרש [וגו']". בזכריה כתיב: "עוד ישבו זקנים
וזקנות ברחובות ירושלם".

עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה, הייתי מתיירא
שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה. עכשיו שנתקיימה
נבואתו של אוריה, בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה
מתקיימת.

בלשון הזה אמרו לו: עקיבא ניחמתנו, עקיבא
ניחמתנו.

Rabbi Akiva said to them, "What is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah? Uriah prophesied during the First Temple period, and Zechariah prophesied during the Second Temple period!

"The [intent of the] verse is to make the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah dependent on the fulfillment of the prophecy of Uriah. Uriah prophesied, 'Because of you [the Jewish people's sins], Zion shall be plowed as a field.' Zechariah prophesied, 'There will [come a time when] old men and women will sit in the squares of Jerusalem.'

"Until the prophecy of Uriah concerning the destruction of the city was fulfilled" [Rabbi Akiva explained], "I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled. Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah [too] will be fulfilled."

The sages responded, "Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us."

QUESTION

What was Isaiah intimating by calling Uriah and Zechariah together as witnesses to his documentation of Jerusalem's impending downfall?

ANSWER

Yeshayahu wanted to make the two prophecies interdependent, fusing both of their accounts into one inseparable entity; if Jerusalem would indeed fall, it would surely be rebuilt.

QUESTION

What about Rabbi Akiva's interpretation of the verse in Isaiah brought the sages to respond with double comfort?



Developing tolerance
to the pain of struggle
requires internal
reframing.

TEXT 5

Talmud, Berachot 60b–61a

רבי עקיבא נהנה קאזיל באורחא. מטא להאי
מתא, בעא אושפיזא, לא יתבי ליה. אמר: "כל
דעביד רחמנא — לטב."

אזל ובת בנדברא, ונהנה בהדיה תרנגולא וסמרא
ושרגא. אתא זיקא כבייה לשרגא. אתא שונרא
אכליה לתרנגולא. אתא אריה אכליה לסמרא. אמר:
"כל דעביד רחמנא — לטב."

ביה בליליא אתא גייסא, שבייה למתא. אמר להו:
לאו אמרי לכו כל מה שעושה הקדוש ברוך הוא
הכל לטובה.

Rabbi Akiva was traveling and arrived at a particular city. He inquired about lodging, and they did not give him any. He said, "Everything that G-d does, He does for the best."

He went and slept in a field. He had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a candle. A gust of wind came and extinguished the candle; a cat came and ate the rooster; a lion came and ate the donkey. He said, "Everything that G-d does, He does for the best."

That night, an army came and took the city into captivity. He said to them, "Didn't I tell you? Everything that G-d does, He does for the best."

TEXT 6

*Midrash, Avot DeRabbi
Natan 6:2*

מה היה תחלתו של רבי עקיבא?

אמרו, בן ארבעים שנה היה ולא שנה כלום.

פעם אחת היה עומד על פי הבאר, אמר: מי חקק
אבן זו? אמרו: לא המים שתדיר [נופלים] עליה
בכל יום?

אמרו [לו]: עקיבא, אי אתה קורא "אבנים שחקו
מים"?

מיד היה רבי עקיבא דן קל וחומר בעצמו: מה רך
פסל את הקשה, דברי תורה שקשה כברזל על אחת
כמה וכמה שיחקקו את לבי שהוא בשר ודם.

מיד חזר ללמוד תורה.

What were Akiva's beginnings?

It is said: He was forty years old and completely illiterate.

One time, while standing by the mouth of a well, he inquired, "Who hollowed out this stone?"

They said to him, "Isn't it the water that drips on it continuously every day? Akiva, haven't you read the [verse that says,] 'Water wears away stone' (Job 14:19)?"

Rabbi Akiva reflected, "If something as soft as water can pierce something as hard as rock, certainly the words of Torah, which are as strong as iron, will pierce my heart of flesh and blood."

Rabbi Akiva immediately returned home and [began] to study Torah.

Rabbi Akiva's ability to dream ambitiously, and to fiercely believe in the power of his hard work, is what motivated him to become the great Jewish leader of his day.



QUESTION

While it's lovely that tomorrow will be great, how do we deal with the painful realities of the present? How does Rabbi Akiva's brighter tomorrow spiel help?

TEXT 7A

Genesis 1:31

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד, וַיְהִי
עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי.

G-d saw all that He had made and,
behold, it was very good.

TEXT 7B

Exodus 25:22

נְחֵמְיָה בֶּרִיָּה דְרַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר נַחֲמָן אָמַר: "וְהִנֵּה
טוֹב מְאֹד". "וְהִנֵּה טוֹב", זֶה אָדָם. "וְהִנֵּה טוֹב", זֶה
יֵצֶר טוֹב, "מְאֹד", זֶה יֵצֶר הָרָע.

וְכִי יֵצֶר הָרָע טוֹב מְאֹד?

אֵלָּא לְלִמְדָּה שְׁאֵלּוּלֵי יֵצֶר הָרָע, לֹא בָנָה אָדָם בֵּית,
וְלֹא נָשָׂא אִשָּׁה, וְלֹא הוֹלִיד בָּנִים, שְׁכֵן שְׁלֹמֹה אוֹמֵר:
"כִּי הִיא קִנְיָת אִישׁ מֵרֵעֵהוּ".

Nechemiah, son of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman, said, “And, behold, it was good”: this refers to the good inclination, and “very [good]”: this refers to the evil inclination.

Is the evil inclination “very good?”

Were it not for the evil inclination, a person would not build a house, neither marry nor beget children. In the words of Solomon, “[I have noted that all labor and skillful enterprise come] from people’s envy of each other” (Ecclesiastes 4:4).

QUESTION

Why does the good inclination receive a designation of “good,” whereas the evil inclination receives a designation of “very good?”

ANSWER

It is only through struggle with one’s evil inclination that one’s good inclination reaches a state of very good, their highest potential.

TEXT 8

*Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak
Schneersohn, Sefer
Hamaamarim 5606, p. 68*

ויובן זה על דרך משל, כמו נהר גדול ורחב ביותר .
.. ויש מקום אשר שם הוא שפיכת המים,
שנמשכים לכמה נהרות קטנים ונחלים רבים . . .
והגם . . . המים הנגרים מהנהר הגדול הולכים
בשפעת מרוצה גדולה ביותר, ומכל מקום העפר
שעל שפת הנהר נשאר בקיומו . . .

אבל כשסותמים מקום יציאת הנהר הגדול,
שהסתימה היא באבנים גדולות ועפר מהודק היטב
מבלי נתון מקום להמים להתפרץ, הנה אז הרי
המים מתקבצים ומתכווצים בהנהר עצמו, וכיוון זה
מוסיף הגברה בכח המים שבהנהר . . .

Take the example of a large flowing river: . . .
At a certain point, the river bifurcates into
multiple distributaries. . . . [Under normal
conditions], despite the speed of the current,
the water stays within the river banks and
flows into each distributary, without
overflowing the banks. . . .

But say [a dam is erected and] the river's
flow becomes blocked with large boulders
packed with dirt [in between the cracks]. The
water no longer flows down and is forced to
remain in the upper part of the river. This
increases the pressure of the water and
compounds the force of the river's natural
current. . . .

TEXT 8

*Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak
Schneersohn, Sefer
Hamaamarim 5606, p. 68*

עד כי בכל עוז גבורתם פותחים וסותרים את
הסתימה ומתפרצים בקול רעש גדול ובשאון רב
במרוצה גדולה, ביתר שאת ויתר עוז מבתחילה,
והנה לא זו בלבד שפותחים את הסתימה וסותרים
אותה - אלא עוד זאת, שבמרוצתם לוקחים אתם גם
את האבנים והעפר, דאז הנה לא זו בלבד שבטל
כחם מלהעציר את שטיפת המים, אלא עוד זאת, כי
הם עצמם גם כן רצים במרוצה גדולה. והיינו, דעל
ידי התגברות כח המים נהפכו ממהות למהות
במהות עצמם, דתמורת זה שהיו מעכבים את
מרוצת המים הנה הם עצמם נגררים עם זרם שטף
המים, ומרוצה זו של הסותמים הרצים עם המים
הנה מוסיפה כח ועוז במרץ מרוצת המים הסובבם .
..
וטעם הדבר הוא לפי שהמנגד דוקא מעורר התגלות
כח פנימי יותר.

Eventually, the water breaks through the dam with tremendous force, and the water shoots forth with greater speed than the original current. Not only does the water now break the dam but it also pulls along the same boulders and dirt that had once blocked its path. These materials no longer block the water's flow, but they fly forward themselves and contribute to the sheer force of the river's flow.

Why? [It expresses a universal truth:]
opposition is what activates the deepest strength.



The evil inclination is
a hidden friend,
asking for us to push
back and burst forth.
It enables us, our good
inclination, to be very
good.

QUESTION

What is an element of your persona that—at face value—is a negative, which you have managed to use to your advantage personally, socially, or professionally?

QUESTION

What was Isaiah intimating by calling Uriah and Zechariah together as witnesses to his documentation of Jerusalem's impending downfall?

ANSWER

Yeshayahu was telling us that destruction and rehabilitation are inherently inseparable.

TEXT 9

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot
19, pp. 72–73*

על פי זה איז מובן פארוואס ער בריינגט דא דווקא
די נבואה "ציון שדה תחרש": דער ענין פון חרישת
שדה: איז ניט אויף קאליע מאכן די שדה, נאר
אדרבה, חרישה איז א הכרח כדי די שדה זאל
קומען לשלימותה — ונתנה הארץ יבולה,
דורכדעם איז נאכדעם די צמיחה כדבעי; און וואס
מער מען צעאקערט די שדה, אלץ בעסער איז די
זריעה און נאכדעם די צמיחה.

The purpose of plowing a field is not to destroy it. On the contrary, plowing is necessary to enable the field to produce its full yield. It is what ensures healthy growth. The better the field is plowed, the better the yield.



Uriah's example of a plowed field illustrates that somehow, this terrible destruction would enable Zion to bounce back, stronger than before.

QUESTION

What about Rabbi Akiva's interpretation of the verse in Isaiah caused the sages to reply with double comfort?

ANSWER

Rabbi Akiva addressed both anxieties that plagued his colleagues (the first comfort,) and further dared them to undertake a wild reframing exercise (the second comfort.)

KEY POINTS

1. The prophet Isaiah conveys G-d's words of double comfort after the Temple's destruction. In the story of Rabbi Akiva, the language of double comfort is also employed.
2. Drawing from his personal journey, Rabbi Akiva was a master at looking past the present negative reality to a brighter future.
3. What's more, Rabbi Akiva was able to reframe the present and see any challenge as an opportunity for growth.
4. Such is the nature of true growth: It is only born out of resistance and opposition. Life's struggles are not a bug; they're a feature.

