



Getting to the Point

Contrapuntal music in movies is quite cool. That's when the action and the music portray opposite moods. It can be very effective to get the viewer more deeply involved emotionally in the film's action or concept, like hearing the soothing ballad We'll Meet Again while A-bombs are dropping at the end of Dr. Strangelove (1964), or the Marines singing M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E as they march into battle in Full Metal Jacket (1987). There's a famous verse in this week's Torah reading which present us with a similarly jarring feeling.

Here's the beginning of that verse: When you have children and grandchildren, and have been established in the land for a long time (Devarim 4:25). Sounds nice, pleasant, even delightful. The Jews are having families and settling blissfully into the land. Even the word 'for a long time' (NOSHANTEM) reminds us of the term for 'well preserved produce' (NOSHAN) in the blessings of parshat B'chukotai. But the continuation jars us from the idyll: then you will act destructively

(HISHCHATEM, perhaps 'corrupt' or 'decadent') and fashion an idol, an image of something, which is evil in the eyes of the Lord, your God, Whom you will anger.

This very disturbing verse is also very famous, because it is the beginning of the reading for the Ninth of Av. This is unique. Of all the special Torah readings on our calendar, only Tisha B'Av has a passage which appears in that same week's parsha. So, it behooves us to analyze this quote to help us understand this week's special event and our parsha.

There are, the Ramban points out, two basic approaches to the quote. It is either a prediction of what will come. This makes sense because there is no conditional 'if' like in the TOCHACHOT (curses). Or it could be a warning. This outcome will come to pass if your descendants stray. The warning aspect is predicated on the Jews turning from God after a long period of quiet.

The Ramban supports the prediction viewpoint based upon a Gematria. The word NESHANTEM has the numerical value 852, which is the number of years from entering the land until the destruction of the First Holy Temple minus 2, according to the Talmud (Gittin 88a).

Reb Moshe Alshich (1508-1593) sees more anomalies in our verse, and asks the following additional questions: Why does the verse specify two generations, why does it go from singular (TOLID) to plural (NESHANTEM), and isn't sculpting an image itself an act of HASHCHATA (decadent, destructive behavior)?

He suggests that we started with the singular because it refers to the generation (DOR) which survived the desert and entered Eretz Yisrael. That group will have children. The Alshich further posits that the two generations in the verse represents the two periods of loyalty to God described in the book of Shoftim, namely the period of Yehoshua and the era of the Elders whom he personally inspired.

Rav Alshich's question about the use of HASHCHATA is explained by informing us that this term is usually associated with ZIMA, sins of promiscuity. It was this reprehensible behavior which led to idolatry, and then the dissolution of society. This is a powerful description of the demise of the first Jewish state.

Then there's the Kli Yakar (1550-1619), whose second explanation truly resonates with me. 'If you can imagine that you strongly possess

the land over a long period of time, then you can think that your possession of the land is absolute, and, therefore, who could possibly take it from us?' In other words, we've got it, and who's going to evict us? Now, we see clearly the problem: Complacency!

To fully understand the position of the Kli Yakar, look at the last verse in the section: Keep His statutes and His commandments, which I command you this day, that it may be well with you and your children after you, and that you may prolong your days upon the earth which the Lord your God gives you all of the days (KOL HAYAMIM, verse 40). See that last phrase? It can mean 'forever' or 'on a daily basis'. The Kli Yakar is warning us to heed the latter translation.

We love living in Eretz Yisrael, but woe to those who take this Divine boon for granted. Periodically, I hear people question the continued observance of Tisha B'av in our proto-Redeemed State. The Kli Yakar is addressing them. The commemoration of this tragic date is as critical as ever. It's just with a slightly different theme: Appreciate this gift from our God, the alternative is too horrendous to contemplate!