JERUSALEM: If I ever forget you, Yerushalayim! (586-516 BCE)

וְאַף -גַּם -זֹאת בִּהְיוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם לֹא -
מְאַסְתִּים וְלֹא -גְעַלְתִּים לְכַלֹּתָם — לְהָפֵר בְּרִיתִי
. .אִתָּם כִּי אֲנִי ה ’אֱלֹקיהֶם
Vayiqra, Leviticus, 26:44.

In 586 BCE, the Bet HaMiqdash and the city of Yerushalayim were destroyed, and the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon. Typically, judging by what happened to ALL the neighboring peoples of Israel who lived through the destruction of their kingdoms and exile, the end of Yerushalayim would have brought the end of Israel.

The historian Sebag Montefiore says that once defeated, peoples of antiquity abandoned their gods and adopted the gods of the victorious people. That was the most logical reaction to the most significant national tragedy. Why? Because the defeat of a people meant that their gods had been defeated by other gods who were more powerful than them. It was the right time to adopt and worship new gods and a new king. And, of course, once in exile, no people of antiquity would have conceived the ridiculous idea that one day they would return to their kingdom. They lost their lands, had no weapons, no gods, and no king. They must make a great effort to forget the past, adapt, and survive to the new reality.

But how come Jews did not forget their kingdom? After their defeat, where did we get the outrageous idea that they should continue to remember their land and their God?

The key is in the book of Vayiqra. There, at the end of chapter 26, the Tora speaks of the covenant ברית between God and the Jewish people. The Jewish people must fulfill their mission, following the divine laws and serving a single and

invisible God. The Tora predicts that the Jewish people will not be left without enemies who want their land or who seek to destroy them. HaShem then offers the Jewish people a covenant: if the people follow His laws, they will have His blessing and protection. According to this agreement, one part of that protection is “conditional” and the other “unconditional”.

The unconditional clause is that HaShem guarantees that the Jewish people will never disappear and that regardless of what the people do or do not do, “the Pact” will never be canceled (or replaced, as Christians claim!)!

The conditional clause, on the other hand, is the permanence of the Jews in the land of Israel. If, despite the punishments and the warnings, the Jewish people abandon God, He will withdraw His protection; the enemy will prevail; the cities will be destroyed, and the people will be exiled. 26:14 “If you do not obey me and do not obey these commandments … 26:15 if you despise My laws and My precepts … in violation of My covenant … 26:31 your cities will become ruins and your sanctuaries will be desolate … 26:33 and I will scatter you among the nations [of the earth] …

The pagan gods considered themselves invincible and never contemplated their cities’ destruction or their followers’ exile. That is why the defeat of their people meant their gods were powerless. The Tora, however, announces explicitly that the permanence of the people of Israel in the land of Israel is conditional upon the observance of Israel’s law. And if the people would leave HaShem, they will be banished. The exile of the Jewish people, then, is NOT proof that HaShem lied to us when He promised us His protection or that the pact was repealed. ON THE CONTRARY! Exile was the best proof that the pact was real! The Babylonian exile was a punishment “contemplated in the covenant”. It was not HaShem who abandoned us; it was us who abandoned HaShem. Ironically, in the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people finally understood that what the Tora had warned 1000 years ago was true, and

what was happening to them now had to happen, according to the covenant with HaShem!

Now, if the pact remained firm, we would also survive “as a people in exile” (another incredible anomaly!). 26:44 … and despite all this, when they [the Jewish people] are in the land of their enemies, I will not abandon or despise them, nor let them be destroyed, breaking My covenant … because I am HaShem their God …

In Babylon, our first exile, we learned the lesson. There, in exile, we did what we did not do when we lived in our land. In Babylon, we refused to forget our God, and we promised ourselves NOT to forget Yerushalayim, His Kingdom.
What the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem felt and decided is recorded explicitly in Psalm 137 of Tehillim: “By the rivers of Babylon … we sat down to mourn and remember Zion (Yerushalayim) … and [although] we had hung our harps in the willows, our masters asked us to sing for them the famous songs of Zion … [and we refused], saying, how could we sing the songs of HaShem in a strange land? Yerushalayim! If I ever forgot about you, let my right hand paralyzed … let my tongue [dry], and get stuck to my palate, if I would not bring you to my memory in the moments of my greatest joy … “.

And this is how our return began.