

Potomac Torah Study Center

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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Hamas continues to manipulate the media while pretending to negotiate with Israel. Hersh Polin Goldberg, cousin of very close friends of ours, remains a captive. We continue our prayers for the hostages and all our people stuck in Gaza. Israel is being roundly condemned for causing a fire at a humanitarian tent camp in Rafah, despite the fact that intelligence indicates it was the fault of Hamas. For more information, see <https://mail.yahoo.com/d/folders/1/messages/ABuU1xg-JoTtZliKAwH70IO8PXo> May our people in Israel wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully – with the continued help of Hashem.

When one considers Bechukotai, thoughts obviously focus on the Tochacha, the lengthy section of blessings and horrible curses that dominates this final parsha of Vayikra. As usual, Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander's Dvar Torah brings a profound message for current challenges facing our people. After the Tochacha, the Torah turns to the Arachin, mitzvot of how to value a person or animal that someone vows to donate to the Beit HaMikdash. Rabbi Brander observes that after the awful curses of the Tochacha, an obvious reaction is to question whether anyone living through such an experience would consider himself to have any value to God.

Rabbi Brander observes, following the Kotzer Rebbe, that the Torah turns to the Arachin as a tikkun for the Tochacha, to lift the spirits of our people who have just gone through horrible disasters. The Torah teaches how to value people, thus demonstrating that Hashem values every human, whether during good times or bad. The Torah states that every human has value, and we must cherish every human life. We need to absorb this message, especially during the dark period since October 7, when we have lost many Jewish lives to Hamas, the kidnaping and hostages, and even to the people of Gaza who have suffered and died.

As an economist, the real cost of any action is opportunity cost – what could have been in lieu of the unfortunate action. For each Israeli killed, the opportunity cost is what that person could have been plus the personal losses of each person important to the deceased victim. For hostages, the opportunity cost includes the value of the time the hostage lost as well as the cost of returning the person to full physical and mental health.

The opportunity cost of the Arab/Israeli conflict includes the seventy-five years during which the Arabs have refused to live in peace with Jews. During much of the period of Christian persecution of Jews in Europe, the Arabs permitted Jews to live and work in peace in their lands. These periods were times when Arabs flourished in culture and science. Since

1948, with Arab countries focusing on destroying Israel, Jews have been flourishing in science, medicine, and literature, but Arabs seem to have little value added to these fields. If Arabs, including the PLO, Hamas, and other terrorist groups, had instead focused on improving the world, who knows how much they might have contributed. Here is a summary from Wikipedia:

Of the 965 individual recipients of the Nobel Prize and the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences between 1901 and 2023, at least 214 have been Jews or people with at least one Jewish parent, representing 22% of all recipients.

Jews represent approximately 0.2 percent of the world population – and up to 22 percent of Nobel Prize winners. Where are the Arabs in this counting? The opportunity cost of hating Jews is stunning.

The campaign of the more than a hundred million Arabs in the Middle East compounds the opportunity cost of the Arab war against Israel. Since 1948, the other Arab countries have rarely permitted any “Palestinians” to immigrate into their countries. These countries appear to want to keep descendants of Arab citizens in Israel from 1948 in refugee camps surrounding Israel. If other Moslem countries in the Middle East had permitted families who fled Israel to become citizens of their countries, many of them might have become productive adults and contributed to tikkun olam. When Israel turned over Gaza to the Arabs in 2006, they left the modern Israeli equipment and agriculture that had made the land productive. The Arabs destroyed all the Israeli improvements and turned Gaza into a desert refuge for hatred.

Rabbi Brander’s focus on the lessons of Arachin is only a beginning of the disaster of Middle Eastern politics for the people of the region – and for the world. Hashem gave humans free will and the opportunity to work to improve the world or make it worse. The lessons of the past nearly eight months is the beginning of the cost of Arab hatred of Jews. My discussion extends the analysis to include the huge costs that go beyond these eight months. Including the costs of the explosion of anti-Semitism throughout the world makes the opportunity cost too great for me to explore.

Despite the horrors facing Jews throughout the world, we still have a mandate to do all we can to make the world a better place. One necessary condition is to work on our personal mitzvot, including our personal relationships with Hashem. We must also teach these lessons to our children and grandchildren. Our relationships with others should include evaluating their attitudes toward Jews and Israel. Making the world a better place includes making Israel safe and fighting anti-Semitism in schools, universities, and all levels of government – both in our country and abroad.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z”l, would have agreed with everything I wrote. Indeed, he shared very similar feelings with me on many occasions.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat

Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Parshat Bechukotai: Challenge & Self Worth
By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5784 (2024)
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

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 tochaha, or 'rebuke,' fills the first half of Parshat Bechukotai, 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 (Temple) 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 set in, 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. Bechukotai #6) in its interpretation of the verse from Tehillim (89:7), "For who in the heavens is comparable to God?" The term for "comparable," yaaroch (יערך), is read by our rabbis as a reference to Arachin (ערכין), 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.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Behar Bechukosai: Then Peace Has a Chance

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5767 (2007)

If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them, then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit. Your threshing will last until the vintage and the vintage will last until the sowing; you will eat your bread to satiety and you will dwell securely in the land. I will grant)Shalom(Peace in the land....)Vayikra 26:3-6(

If you will follow My decrees: That you should be striving in Torah learning.)Rashi(

I will grant Shalom: Maybe you'll say well there's plenty of food and there's drink too but you should know that without peace there is nothing. All these things and then "I will grant you peace" teaches us that peace is equivalent to everything. And so is written "Who makes peace and creates bad")Isaiah 45:7()Rashi(

What is this crucial ingredient called "Shalom"? How do we define it. Sometimes the Torah itself can be used as a self-referential dictionary. By observing the context of a word's use we can discern its meaning. How so?

Quoting the entire verse from Isaiah that Rashi refers to above, "Who forms light and creates darkness, Who makes peace and creates bad, I am HASHEM Who does all these!" the Talmud)Bava Basra 58A(infers that elements are presented in contrast to one another. Just as dark and light are opposites so "Shalom" – peace and bad are opposites.

That sounds strange at first. The opposite of peace might be war, and the opposite of bad we might presume to be good, but that peace is the opposite of bad is a new angle, a different perspective on one or both of those extra big words. What is "bad" and what is "peace"?

The Chovos HaLevavos with his "Eye Hospital" analogy explains how, when untutored, people naturally miss out on perceiving the continuous flow of goodness from HASHEM, because of an intense preoccupation with and a profound misunderstanding about the tribulations of life.

"How closely they resemble in this regard to blind men who are brought to a house prepared for them with everything that could benefit them; everything in it is arranged perfectly; it is fully equipped and ideally suited to benefit them and provide for their welfare. In addition, effective medications and a skilled physician to administer them are provided for their treatment, so that their sight might be restored.

Nevertheless, the men neglect to undergo treatment for their eyes and disregard the advice of the physician who had been treating them. They walk about the house handicapped greatly by their blindness, stumbling over the very things that had been prepared for their benefit, falling on their faces; some suffer bruises, and others broken limbs.

They suffer much and their troubles are compounded. They complain bitterly about the owner and builder of the house and condemn his actions. In their eyes he has been negligent and a poor

leader, and they believe that his motivation had not been to do them good and show them kindness but to cause them pain and injury. This leads them to deny the benevolence and the kindness of the owner.”

I had a very thoughtful phone conversation just the other day with someone suffering with the subject of suffering. It's not to be taken lightly. Near the end I quoted the oft repeated phrase, *“If someone wants to believe in G-d he has to explain the suffering that goes on in the world but if he wants to not believe in a Creator then he has to explain everything else.”* I left him with a challenge—a homework assignment to guestimate the proportion of “Goodness” to “Bad”. I have not heard back from him yet! Not a bad question to ponder! Hmmm!

The situation of bad is actually a lack of harmony – “peace” not a void of good. All the ingredients for improvement and harmonious living are there whether misappropriated or not. Like navigating in traffic, when all drivers are careful and constantly mindful of their responsibilities – “following My decrees” – “striving to learn,” “bad” stays home and **then peace has a chance.**

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5772-behar/>

Bechukotai – The Rosh Yeshiva Responds – Counting a Security Person in Another Room as the Tenth for a Minyan

by Rabbi Dov Linzer

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

...and dwell in your land safely (Vayikra 26:5)

QUESTION — Houston, TX

We pray out of the JCC and are required to have a security person at the door when the building is otherwise closed, which includes Shabbat. For financial reasons, we use rotating volunteers, but sometimes, like for Mincha, we have ten men, and only ten men. Other times, there are exactly ten men as well as women, but the optics of requiring the guard to be a woman are rough. The security person can just barely see into the shul room from the back door of the room where we daven. Maybe the last person in the room can see them. Can that security person be the tenth, *bediavad* or *lekatchilah*?

ANSWER

The Shulchan Arukh (OC 55:14) rules that a tziruf (inclusion) for minyan can be achieved even if a person is outside the room/outdoors if he can be seen by those inside. This is based on the established ruling by zimmun that if some of the group can see some of the other group, it is one group for zimmun (Shulchan Arukh OC 195:1). While some argue against the comparison and are stricter by minyan (mentioned by Mishnah Berurah 55:52, Mishnah Berurah 55:57, see Arukh HaShulchan OC 55:20), the accepted psak is to rely on Shulchan Arukh when necessary. I should stress that you have to situate a man (yes, man) in the room inside so that he can see and be seen by the man outside. That is key.

It is not fully clear to me why you can't arrange a system that a man always takes this job when there are more than 10 men, and a woman when there are exactly 10 men, assuming that it winds up being about an equal division. But I am sure that there are reasons why this won't work. Whatever the case, if you deem it important to sometimes have a man do the job, then yes, you can definitely follow the ruling of Shulchan Arukh, but with the criteria above — a man within the room must be able to see and be seen by the man designated as security guard.

* President and Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, NY. [Hebrew text omitted because of issues moving across software products that do not translate easily.]

<https://library.yctorah.org/2024/05/ryrbechukotai/>

Collective Responsibility: In Crisis and Beyond

By Rabbi Yehuda Shmuel Hain *

In the middle of this week's terrifying Tohakhah, the Rabbis located a core halakhic and theological principle.

They will stumble over each other as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Leviticus 26:37)

“They will stumble over each other” — read this as ‘stumble because of the sins of another’: this teaches that all Israelites are responsible for one another.” (Sifra ad loc.)

The idea that “*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*,” — all of Israel are guarantors for each other — has a number of significant applications. It serves as the halakhic basis for an individual who has already fulfilled their own mitzvah of recitation (eg. Kiddush on Shabbat) to still be able to perform that recitation on behalf of another.

Why, of all places, did rabbinic tradition root this concept of arvut (mutual responsibility) in such a frightening verse? Surely, there were other, more uplifting, alternatives. For example, the rabbis note the singular verb “*Vayihan*” describing the feeling of unity at the encampment at Sinai (see Rashi, Exodus 19:2). Why couldn't that verse have served as the source for collective responsibility?

By locating the source of collective responsibility in the admonition, the rabbis were conveying a deep teaching. In fact, this teaching has taken on additional resonance as we continue to navigate the trauma of October 7th and the war in Gaza.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, there was a profound sense of connectivity with our brothers and sisters in Israel. Their pain was our pain; their losses, our losses. The rabbis knew that crisis and catastrophe engender natural feelings of arvut. In moments of true terror, the rabbis teach us, we feel a deep sense of responsibility for each other.

But as the weeks and months pass, it may be more challenging to maintain those same, intense feelings of connectivity. That is the ongoing challenge of arvut, to continue to be guarantors for each other even when we may feel less connected, even after the initial catastrophe.

Indeed, Talmudic commentators develop two different explanations for how arvut works. One view says that since we are all guarantors for each other, I have not really fulfilled my own personal mitzvah unless and until all of Israel has fulfilled that mitzvah. Since your mitzvah is my mitzvah, your lack of fulfillment results in my own lack of fulfillment, thereby allowing me to assist you in the mitzvah.

But there is another approach to arvut. It suggests that my own mitzvah is not impacted in any way by your lack of fulfillment. We are two separate individuals. As such, your status cannot affect mine. Instead, the magic of arvut is that as your guarantor, I am capable of traversing the gap between my own complete fulfillment and your lack of fulfillment. I can help you fulfill your obligation, even though my personal obligation has already been fully discharged.

This second model of arvut may be even more ambitious than the first in that it acknowledges the integrity of each individual while allowing one person to still assist the other. It can also help guide us as we attempt to remain connected to each other for the long haul. Though we may not feel the same intense feeling of connectivity at all times, we have the ability — the responsibility — to continue to see ourselves as the guarantors for the entirety of the Jewish people.

* Rabbi, YIOZ of North Riverdale/Yonkers; Adjunct faculty at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah; Rosh Beit Midrash and Co-Director of Machon Siach at SAR High School.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2024/05/behav5784/>

Walk, not Talk: Thoughts on Parashat Behukotai

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

A man who lives near our synagogue recently attended an evening service in order to say kaddish in memory of his father. Although we almost always have a minyan present, that night we had a problem. The weather was bad, some of our "regulars" were out of town - -we only had eight men at services.

Our guest was agitated and angry. He had come to say kaddish, but we were not able to provide him this opportunity. He stomped angrily out of the synagogue, indignant that we did not have a minyan when he needed one.

Yes, it is a pity that we missed minyan that night.

But who was this man who was so angry at us? He was a neighbor of the synagogue who has lived nearby for many years. Yet, he is not a member of the synagogue and has not contributed even one cent to the synagogue for all these years. He never attends the synagogue, except when he needs to say kaddish. Although he has done nothing to strengthen the synagogue or to bolster our minyan (except when he needs to say kaddish), he expects the synagogue to be there to serve him at his convenience; he expects ten men to be at services whenever he deigns to show up.

He feels that he has a right to benefit from the synagogue, even though he does nothing to help the synagogue maintain itself. He was indignant that ten men didn't show up for him to say kaddish, even though he never shows up to help make minyan for others. He feels entitled to take, but doesn't feel responsible to give.

This week's Torah portion begins with the words: "*If you walk in My statutes.*" The Torah might have said: if you observe My statutes, or if you keep My statutes." Why does it use the word "walk?"

Rabbi Hayyim Palache, a sage of 19th century Izmir, explained that when the Torah commands us to "walk" in God's ways, it means that we are to be active participants. We are not supposed to wait for opportunities to fulfill mitzvot, but we are urged to "walk," to actively seek ways of doing that which is right and good.

To "walk" in God's statutes means that we actively take part in religious life, that we happily and eagerly accept responsibility to do our share as part of the community. It means that we pay our way, and do our best, and participate as well as we can.

Some people somehow think that they are entitled to benefit from synagogues or other communal institutions, even though they do not participate in maintaining those institutions. Who exactly is supposed to pay the bills? Who exactly is supposed to attend daily services and make minyan every morning and evening? These people don't really care, as long as the responsibility doesn't devolve on their shoulders. Let others provide!

The Torah portion reminds us to "walk" in God's statutes, to participate actively, happily and responsibly in maintaining a vibrant Jewish religious life. Those who shirk the responsibility and privilege of "walking" in God's ways deprive themselves of the satisfaction and self-respect that come with ethical, righteous religious living.

Synagogues and communal institutions don't exist just through wishful thinking. Minyanim don't happen just from good intentions. If we each do not do our share, we have no right to expect others to pick up the slack for us.

Let us "walk" in God's statutes. It's an important key to personal happiness and communal strength. What is needed is "walk," not "talk."

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or

small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its current fund raising period. Thank you.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/walk-not-talk-thoughts-parashat-behukotai-may-21-2011>

Beyond Victimhood: A Positive Jewish Message

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Holocaust, understandably, haunts the Jewish people. We can never forget the millions of Jews who were tortured and murdered by the Germans and their collaborators. Whenever a crisis erupts that threatens Jews, there is an almost visceral reaction to call up the memory of the Holocaust.

After the Hamas massacre of Israelis on October 7, Jewish media was quick to report that this was the highest number of Jews murdered in a single day since the Holocaust.

In attempting to combat antisemitism in New York, a program was initiated to bring all eighth-grade students to the Museum of Jewish Heritage, where they could learn about the Holocaust. When international leaders visit Israel, a visit to Yad Vashem is almost always part of the itinerary.

The prevailing wisdom is that when people – especially young people – learn about the horrors of the Holocaust, they will become more sympathetic toward Jews and aware of the dangers of religious and racial hatred. With more knowledge about the Holocaust, it is assumed that people will be less prone to antisemitic attitudes and behaviors.

The various efforts at Holocaust education have had a positive impact on many. And yet, Holocaust education – unless handled very well – can have negative consequences. For those steeped in anti-Jewish hatred, the Holocaust may actually encourage their antisemitism. They view Jews as a despised minority group that is an easy target for hatred and violence. They see that millions of Jews were systematically slaughtered while much of the world stood aside. In the minds of rabid Jew-haters, the Holocaust is an ideal, not a disaster.

While maintaining the memory of the Holocaust is surely very important, we need also to project a positive image of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism. Much of the antisemitism we face today is directly related to anti-Zionism. We need to focus on conveying the historical connection of the Jewish people to our land going back to biblical days.

Even after being exiled from the Land of Israel several times over the millennia, in the last instance at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE, the Jewish People have continued to live in, pray for, and dream of a return to their historic homeland.

After nearly 1,900 years, the Jews gained sovereignty over their land with the establishment of the modern State of Israel. This is one of the most amazing adventures in human history. For an ancient people to return to their historic homeland and build a dynamic, democratic society is an unprecedented story of courage, faith, and persistence.

Our story is truly inspiring and full of hope, spirituality, creativity, courage, and resilience. Despite all the hurdles we have had to face – and still face – the Jews are a strong and vibrant people. We need to tell our story in a confident voice – not as propaganda, not in sound bites – in a sophisticated and intelligent way that will convey the power of the Jewish experience.

The re-emergence of a sovereign Jewish state is a remarkable historic achievement. Yet, as we know, it has not been received with love or understanding by many in the Arab world. In particular, we face those who foster the Hamas ideology that negates the Jewish right to our own land.

The goal of the haters, by their own admission, is the destruction of Israel. And while wars on the battlefield can achieve military victories for Israel, ultimate victory will come only when the ideology of hatred is defeated. Just as Israel devotes

so much courage and brilliance to its physical defense, it needs to devote equal – and more – courage and brilliance to fighting the murderous ideology that has infected many beyond Hamas.

To combat this ideology of hatred, we need more than Holocaust education.

We need a powerful, positive presentation of Jewish history, Jewish connection to the land of Israel, Jewish idealism, and Jewish striving for peace and mutual understanding.

We would do well to remember the prophecy of Isaiah (42:6) who relates God's wondrous promise to the people of Israel that they will become "a light unto the nations." We need to focus on the light; on what we have given, are giving, and can give to the world.

Isaiah (51:3) foresaw a time like ours when the wasteland that was Israel turned into a beautiful and thriving country: "For the Lord comforts Zion; He comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song."

That is Zionism that is Judaism, that is the aspiration of the Jewish people.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Fighting Anti-Semitism by Getting Straight As

By David Suissa *

If you're a Jewish college student these days, chances are you've had to confront an epidemic of hostility against Jews and Israel in the wake of October 7.

How does one fight back without looking weak and reactive?

So far, the Jewish community has rightfully focused on calling out the hate and demanding equal protection for Jewish students. That protection must obviously continue, but it's not enough.

There's an additional way to fight back against the forces of hate: through the chutzpah of success.

That thought occurred to me after spending a few days in Los Angeles with my daughter, who goes to NYU. We spent quite a bit of time talking about what Jewish students have faced since Oct. 7, but we also talked about her studies and her life.

After Oct. 7, she decided early on that she would help put up posters for the Israeli hostages and attend pro-Israel events, but she wouldn't let the anti-Israel fury disrupt her life.

One reason was a lack of respect for the protests themselves. The fact that the anti-Israel animus burst out immediately after 1200 Israelis got massacred by Hamas on Oct. 7 exposed them not as seekers of justice but as haters of Jews.

Over the months, as the protests grew more hysterical, they morphed into a joyless bunch of wannabe revolutionaries who think it's cool to hijack graduation ceremonies and block roads to airports.

Why allow such purveyors of nuisance to mess up one's life? Why give them that power?

Indeed, my daughter (and several of her Jewish friends) chose not to give them that power. She kept her eye on her goals, continued to do the things she loves, and, yes, even got a bunch of A's.

I say this not just as a proud father but as a proud Jew. Playing the Victim Olympics has never been a winning move for Jews. Even when our victimhood is completely justified, in the long run we're always better off by building on our accomplishments.

This sense of accomplishment a deep expression of the Jewish ethos. Especially during the college years, Jewish students want to define themselves not by their haters but by their life dreams.

Ever since we landed on these American shores, the freedom to succeed has been the Jewish drug of choice. Jews have been admired in America not for being weak victims who need protection but for being strong contributors who value opportunity.

None of this means we shouldn't confront antisemitism; it means we should confront it without fear and without losing our Jewish mojo.

The most successful Jewish organization in the world — Chabad — has always done just that.

For the thousands of Chabad emissaries across the world, the best way to combat darkness is to spread light. Every Friday night, across hundreds of college campuses, Chabad and other groups like Hillel fortify Jewish students not with the power of protests but with the power of their tradition.

There are occasionally cases when a Chabad emissary will target a problem directly, as when the Chabad rabbi at Harvard recently confronted a commencement speaker about a remark that he found antisemitic.

But by and large, the Chabad way is to double down on Judaism. The more antisemitism they see, the more pro-semitism they bring. They know that nurturing something positive will create a deeper Jewish identity than simply taking down a negative.

Most of us, however, prefer to take down negatives. We feel more productive when we fight a threat directly. If protesters make Jewish students feel unsafe, we'll focus on the threats, whether through legal means or by compelling authorities to fulfill their duties to protect the students. And that is the correct thing to do: Physical safety should always come first.

But as crucial as it is, safety is not everything. It's a starting point. The Jewish ideal has always been to aim higher. It may be hard to think that way in the midst of hostility, but it behooves us to seek the path that will help us thrive as strong and proud Jews.

It's tempting to think that because anti-Israel protesters attract so many loud supporters, they must be winning. They're not. Those who measure their self-worth by their worship of victimhood invariably end up alone with their screams of emptiness.

The real winners aren't screaming on their campus squares; they're celebrating life at a warm Shabbat table, reconnecting with their friends, their ancient tradition and their life dreams.

Some of them are even celebrating getting straight A's.

* Editor, *Jewish Journal* (Los Angeles). *jewishjournal.com*. Reprinted from the *Jewish Journal of Los Angeles*, May 26, 2024.

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Bichukosai: Beyond a Persuasion

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

The Parsha begins with a promise of goodness if we, “*Go in the Chukim and observe the Mitzvos.*” Rashi wonders what “*Go in the Chukim*” refers to. After all, all Mitzvos are included in the second part of the statement, “*observe the Mitzvos.*” Rashi explains that “*Go in the Chukim*” refers to toil in Torah study.

This expression, “*To toil in Torah study,*” is indeed the text of the Bracha that we recite each morning. It is apparently an intrinsic part of Jewish values. But what exactly does it mean to toil in Torah study?

The word “*Chok*” (which is used here to describe a unique type of Torah study) refers to something that remains surprisingly steadfast and constant. Heaven and earth are referred to as “*Chok*” (Yirmiya 33) because they endure forever. Similarly, a Mitzva that we observe even though we do not understand its reason is called a “*Chok.*” This is because in the conflict between man’s logic and the Mitzva the Mitzva remains the constant. The Mitzva is like a lighthouse to a sailor. Whatever preferences he might have had based on the winds and the waves; the lighthouse guides him so that he can avoid wrecking his ship. Similarly, we recognize that the Mitzva is from Hashem, so we subordinate our logic to the Mitzva.

When Hashem refers to Torah study with the word “*Chok,*” He is describing a specific level of depth in Torah study. This is the level where we are not just reading text, but we are resolving contradictions. The Chok level of learning is when we recognize Torah teachings as sacred and strive to reconcile them sincerely, even when they seem contradictory. This is the style of learning which is classic in Talmud study where two contradictory texts are compared, contrasted, and analyzed, until clarity emerges.

Remarkably, to properly protect this level of learning, we have a tradition that no corrections may be made in the text of the Talmud. On the unusual occasion that a copyist error seems to have occurred, even the greatest sages (like the Vilna Gaon and the Bach) will only propose an edit as a footnote, but the printers will not print it in the actual printed text. This is because *the very essence of Talmud study is to focus on nuance*. If we were to simply change the text whenever we observed a contradiction, we would handicap the student from delving deeper and recognizing nuanced distinctions. Recognizing every statement in the Torah as “*Chok,*” steadfast and constant, guides us past superficial Torah study to deep, advanced Torah study. It also informs us of the attitude we have towards the gift called Torah even as outsiders promote the latest values of secular culture. Whether we are faced with “melting pot” philosophy (“aren’t we all just one, with humanistic values”) or faced with specific threats about the justness of our values, the Jew recognizes the Torah as “*Chok,*” a steadfast and constant value system. We are humble in the presence of Torah. We know that one read will not produce nuance or clarity. But we are confident that with dedicated effort and the guidance of Torah scholars we will understand what Hashem wants of us in each generation. [emphasis added]

It is remarkable that an opposite perspective was promoted by many German Jews prior to the Holocaust. “*Germans of the Mosaic persuasion,*” is how many wanted to be known. It was as if to say, “*We are not Jews, bearers of a treasure called Torah. We are Germans who happen to have a persuasion towards the teachings of Moses.*” This group downgraded observance to a cultural level where it was nice at times, but not meant to be taken too seriously.

In our time, I know of a woman who interviewed for a Sunday morning job in a Hebrew school where most of the children come from non-observant homes. The principal informed her that most of the children come from homes where they do not light Shabbos candles. The woman asked, “So what is the point of teaching about Shabbos candles?” Instead of responding that we are hoping to influence the families to get more involved, the principal replied, “Well, even if we don’t light the Shabbos candles, it is still a nice cultural thing to learn about, don’t you think?” The woman decided not to take the job.

The idea of “*Chok*” when it comes to Torah study refers to the ability to see two or more great Torah teachings as truth, constant and steadfast, and then work hard to reconcile them through nuance and in-depth study. This toil is referenced in

the holy Bracha we recite each morning: “*Laasok Bidivrei Torah.*” In a broader sense, it is an attitude that guides the Jew throughout life. The Torah is “*Chok*” steadfast and constant, relevant to us in every generation.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Behar-Bechukosai – Sublime Simplicity

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

The Medrash Yalkut Shimoni in the beginning of Bechukosai quotes a verse from Tehillim where Dovid Hamelech tells us that he stayed on the proper path in life by calculating his paths. “*I calculated my paths and returned my feet to your testimonies.*”)Tehillim 119:59(On the simple level Dovid Hamelech is telling us that he regularly evaluated his path in life to ensure he was following G-d’s will, and not veering off course.

The Medrash quotes Rav Huna who tell us in the name of Rav Acha that there is an additional profound lesson in this verse. Dovid Hamelech is also telling us why and how he managed to live a life of righteousness. He considered his “*paths*” – his options in life. One path was to devote his life to G-d. His other choice was to give in to his passions and desires. He carefully considered and evaluated both options, weighing the gains of mitzvos and the losses of sin, and only then turned his feet to G-d’s will. Tehillim is filled with expressions of Dovid Hamelech’s love and devotion to G-d, and with expressions of the most sublime spiritual awareness. Yet, Dovid Hamelech is telling us here that even he was human and was challenged with passions and desires. Moreover, he is telling us that despite his great spiritual achievements and close connection with G-d, he did not strengthen himself against sin only by focusing on lofty spiritual concepts. He would focus and reflect on the basic concepts of reward and punishment to balance his passions and desires.

The Medrash continues with another interpretation adding another meaningful layer to this concept. Rabbi Abba, the son of Rabbi Chiya, explains in the name of Rabbi Yonasan that Dovid Hamelech did not only focus on the consequences of the two paths before him, but he also focused on G-d’s attitude towards those paths. When he considered the paths before him, Dovid Hamelech studied the blessings and curses found in our Parsha and studied how G-d deals with our choices. He saw that the blessings begin with letter aleph and end with the letter tav, the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This teaches us that the blessings are all encompassing, beyond the specific details written in the Torah. The curses on the other hand begin with the letter vav and end with the letter hey, two letters which are next to each other in the Hebrew alphabet. This teaches us that the curses are limited and non-encompassing. Dovid Hamelech further noted that the order of these letters is reversed from their order in the alphabet, indicating that G-d is always ready to reverse the curses and turn them into blessings if we safeguard the path of Torah.

Dovid Hamelech would focus on the blessings and curses and consider these messages. G-d is seeking to reward us significantly when we choose His path and will only punish us as necessary when we veer off course. Furthermore, even when we sin G-d is still yearning to reward us and is ready to do so, as soon as we repent. Dovid Hamelech would reflect and consider how G-d is on our side, rooting for us and longing for our success. It was through this reflection that he was able to devote himself to G-d as he did, and to reach sublime, lofty spiritual heights.

This Medrash is giving us an insight into the inner secrets of the heart of one of the greatest people who ever lived, and his heart looks much like ours. He struggled with passions and chose to focus on reward and punishment to balance

those emotions. He cared for himself and sought to be cared for and cherished. It was only after he understood that G-d deeply cares for us to succeed and to bestow blessing upon us that he was able to devote his heart and soul to G-d. Dovid Hamelech's greatness was rooted in the struggles we live with day in and day out. When we seek to appreciate why mitzvos are worthwhile and to see G-d's love for us we are walking in the footsteps of Dovid Hamelech. The study and ongoing reflection are an integral aspect of our service of G-d. When we take the time reflect on these concepts we are on the path to spiritual greatness.

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

Behar

by Rabbi Herzl Hefter *

[Rabbi Hefter did not send in a Dvar Torah for Behar. Watch this space for his future Devrei Torah]

* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see www.har-el.org. To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

Bechukotai

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

[I do not have a new Dvar Torah from Rabbi Ovadia for Bechukotai. Watch this space for his insights most weeks.]

Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright rights to this material.

Hashem Is Calling on Us

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

This week we finish the third book of the Torah, known in Hebrew as Vayikra, in Greek as Leuitikon, and in Latin as Leviticus.

Now while the Greek and Latin names refer to the Levite family, the word Vayikra means *"to call,"* referring to the initial call God made to Moses to teach him about all the laws and rituals the Levite family needed to perform in the Temple.

It's as if this third book teaches us that all the complicated "whats" and "hows" of the Temple service must be preceded by a feeling of being called. Not for nothing do people who go into Temple or clergy work often describe that they were called into it. Not for nothing do people who enjoy and find purpose in any work whether it be in medicine, law, sculpting or security would call their job a "calling" rather than a job.

We all know the qualitative difference between doing something that we feel called to and doing something that we just have to do and we really don't want to do but we do it because we're grown ups and life isn't all about doing things that we're called to do.

The difference between these two qualities is that we enjoy the former a lot more. We get pleasure from it. It is this pleasure that God asks of us in the last book of Vayikra saying that consequences will come to us if we don't do our work with "joy and gladness of heart."

While of course it's hard to mandate joy in our observance and it's also unrealistic that we can feel and function at some sublime optimal happiness level throughout our Jewish journey, it's good to know that pleasure is what we strive for. We want and hope for ourselves and our children that our Jewish life be a joy and a calling and not a monotonous Sisyphean tedium.

Wishing everyone a Shabbat where we feel the calling to enjoy its services, challah and gatherings.

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Kneseth Israel (Birmingham, AL).

Rav Kook Torah Bechukotai: Judicial Corruption

"As a punishment for [unnecessary] delay in executing judgment, perversion of judgment, and neglect of Torah — sword and plunder increase, pestilence and famine ensue. People eat, yet remain hungry; and they eat their bread by weight.")Shabbat 33a(

The parashah describes terrible calamities — disease, war, famine, and exile — that occur when the Jewish people abandon the Torah. According to Talmudic tradition, a primary cause for punishment is one particular offense: judicial corruption.

Uprooting Corruption

Why does judicial abuse bring about such harsh punishments?

When the court system is corrupt, acquitting the guilty and convicting the innocent, instead of advancing social justice, it promotes injustice and exploitation. A dishonest judicial system indicates that the fundamental social order has unraveled; society has degenerated to gangs of rapacious wolves, as the rich and powerful prey upon the weak and unprotected. In such a disastrous situation, the institutions of society must be completely revamped. If society refuses on its own to champion justice, Divine providence intervenes to uproot society, so that it may be rebuilt on foundations of justice and truth.

Neglect of Torah

What did the Sages mean by bitul Torah — "neglect of Torah"? How is this connected to judicial corruption?

The term bitul Torah refers to a moral decay in society's inner spirit, when the people reject the Torah as an inspiration to seek justice. Its teachings no longer serve as a guideline for spiritual and ethical goals. Bereft of spiritual aspirations, life degenerates into the self-centered pursuit of materialism. Goals are reduced to the mere fulfillment of physical wants and desires. This egocentric attitude undermines one's willingness to work for the communal good and the proper respect for the rights of others.

Hunger of the Soul

The Sages taught that people suffer by "eating, yet remaining hungry." Why this particular punishment?

Our sense of self-worth is based on feelings of honor and integrity. When the principles of law and order are ignored, our positive self-image is damaged. The human soul naturally aspires to the ideals of goodness, enlightenment, and fairness. When our goals are limited only to that which the hand may grab and the tooth may chew, the soul becomes unfulfilled and dissatisfied. We eat to fill our bellies, yet remain feeling empty and discontented.

Bread by Weight

The Sages also taught that “they eat their bread by weight.” What is the nature of this hardship?

Bread is usually sold by unit, not by weight. But in times of famine, bread becomes a scarce commodity and is sold by weight. This change helps reinforce a heightened sensitivity toward the property rights of others. Our former unconcern regarding theft, our indifference toward the property of others, is corrected by a keen awareness of the value of every gram of a loaf of bread.

)*Sapphire from the Land of Israel*. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. III, pp. 185-186.(

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/BECHUKOT60.htm>

Bechukotai: We the People (5774, 5781)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

In the final parsha of the book of Leviticus, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the Sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies:

Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! They will stumble over each other as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. Lev. 26:36-37

There is, on the face of it, nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the Sages said:

*“They will stumble over each other” – read this as ‘stumble because of one another’: this teaches that all Israelites are responsible for one another.”*¹[

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant, he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that their fate and destiny are interlinked -- this could have been found in the Torah’s blessings. Why search for it among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another’s fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another’s aid, there is a general sense of well-being. Conversely, if there is a recession, many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what about when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of everyday life. While Rashi

and his family were living in Christian northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic.

Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the Jews of Spain were enjoying their Golden Age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How could they – as the author of Psalm 137 put it – sing God's song in a strange land?

There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, *"to the most distant lands under heaven."*)Deut. 30:4(There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope. They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness:

You will try to sell yourselves as slaves — both male and female — but no one will want to buy you. Deut. 28:68

Those in Leviticus end with a momentous hope:

But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt's land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the Lord. Lev. 26:44-45

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people will never be destroyed. Nor will God reject them. The covenant will still be in force and its terms still operative. This means that Jews will always be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they have in the land – for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their enemies they will still be bound by mutual responsibility. They will still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible)the "Old Testament" as they called it(. There they learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail for America, but with one difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson's Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama's Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition)always an odd number, three or five or seven(. Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics – words never used by British politicians – namely, "We the people."

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, "Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens."² In Obama's words, "You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country's course."³ That is the essence of covenant: we are all

in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* of 'absolute responsibility': "*The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.*"[4]

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

Whoever can forbid their household]to commit a sin[but does not, is seized for]the sins of[their household.]If they can forbid[their fellow citizens]but do not[they are seized for]the sins of[their fellow citizens.]If they can forbid[the whole world]but do not[they are seized for]the sins of[the whole world. Shabbat 54b

This remains a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of the covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have often argued, to drive American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued throughout this series of essays: that we are all called on to be leaders. One may fairly protest: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow? The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant.

Leadership is the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence - be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still.]emphasis added[

This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what "my people" had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city's 23 primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city's welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently living in Pristina. His answer? Eleven. The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had, along with other international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, the children were lost and unfocused with no systems of support in place to help them.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, immediately formed volunteer teams of youth leaders, sent out to Kosovo for two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organising summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovo Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers, it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations' children's organisation. It was in the wake of this that "the Jewish people" – Israel, the American-based "Joint" and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of chessed, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help, and they can achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size.

When the Jewish people join hands in collective responsibility, they become a formidable force for good.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Sifra ad loc., Sanhedrin 27b, Shavuot 39a.

[2] Lyndon B. Johnson, *Inaugural Address*)United States Capitol, January 20, 1965(.

[3] Barack Obama, *Second Inaugural Address*)United States Capitol, January 21, 2013(.

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, Washington Square Press, 1966, 707.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

[1] Do you feel that the Jewish people still share a collective sense of fate?

[2] Would you agree that we live in a covenantal society nowadays - especially during the COVID pandemic - where we are "all in this together"?

[3] There is a famous Jewish saying, "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*," meaning "*All Israel are responsible for one another*." How does this idea impact your perspective of the Jewish peoplehood?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bechukotai/we-the-people/> Because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail or saved in my archives at PotomacTorah.org, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

Bechukotai: The Great Antidote -- Life Lessons From the Parshah

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l * © Chabad 2024

The Torah portion of Bechukotai is the final portion of the Book of Vayikra, the third of the Five Books of Moses.

Upon completing each of the Five Books, it is customary to wish each other, "Chazak, chazak, venitchazek – be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened." The Shabbat that we read the last portion of each book is thus called Shabbat Chazak.

So five times a year, the Jewish people collectively wish each other, and all Jews, that by virtue of completing a book of Torah, the Torah should imbue us with strength and courage.

This idea is also found in the opening verses of Bechukotai: "*If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them, I will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit.*"¹

The Torah goes on to enumerate blessing after blessing: economic prosperity, peace and security, happiness, offspring, strength, and more.

What brings about these tremendous blessings? *“If you follow My statutes.”*

Since the next words are *“and observe My commandments,”* the instruction to follow G d’s statutes must refer to something other than the fulfillment of His commandments (mitzvot). Rashi explains that *“follow My statutes”* means to toil in the study of Torah. The flow of the verses implies that these blessings come into our lives *“when you toil in Torah study with the intent of observing the mitzvot.”*

All these blessings will rain down upon us when we devote ourselves regularly to studying G d’s Torah.

It’s Never Too Late

The parshah of Bechukotai is often read in proximity to two holidays: Pesach Sheni and Lag BaOmer.

Pesach Sheni, or “Second Passover,” marks the day when those who were unable to bring the Passover offering in its proper time — whether due to impurity or being far from Jerusalem — were given the opportunity exactly one month later to “make up” this mitzvah, and bring the sacrifice.

What is the lesson of Pesach Sheni today, when the Passover Sacrifice is no longer offered? The Rebbe, quoting his father-in-law, the Sixth Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Shneersohn, of righteous memory, writes: *“The theme of Pesach Sheni is that it is never too late. It is always possible to put things right. Even if one was ritually impure, or far away, and even in a case when this impurity, etc. was deliberate - nonetheless he can correct it.”*²

It’s never too late to return to and re-embrace Judaism. What is the first step?

Torah.

A Jew cannot be complete without entering the world of Torah because Torah is G d’s world.

And that is the message that the portion of Bechukotai begins with: When you diligently study Torah, the blessings flow.

Torah Study to the Rescue

The holiday of Lag BaOmer commemorates the day when the plague that killed 24,000 students of the great sage Rabbi Akiva came to an end. It is also — and primarily — a celebration of the life of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, commonly referred to as Rashbi, author of the Zohar, and the first to publicly teach the mystical dimension of the Torah, known as the Kabbalah.

Once, during a severe drought in the Land of Israel, the Jewish People appealed to Rabbi Shimon to intercede with G d to bring about its end. Instead of praying, however, he taught Torah, expounding on the verse, *“How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together”*³ — and miraculously, it began to rain.⁴ Unlike the stories of various other sages who prayed for rain, Rabbi Shimon employed the power of Torah study, extolling the greatness of the unity of the Jewish people through Torah.

Thus, the portion of Bechukotai and the holidays it coincides with underscore the importance of Torah study.
It All Begins With Torah Study

The portion of Bechukotai famously contains the section referred to as the Tochachah – the “Admonition.” After beginning with the tremendous blessings that will be bestowed upon the people when they follow G d’s laws and keep His commandments, it transitions to the Admonition, highlighting the consequences, G d forbid, of failing to do so.

The sages of the Midrash point out that the importance of toiling in Torah study can be seen in the domino-like flow of the verses that begin the section of Admonition.⁵ G d says, *“But if you do not listen to Me and do not perform all these*

commandments, and if you despise My statutes and reject My ordinances, not performing any of My commandments, thereby breaking My covenant ...”⁶

Rashi, quoting this Midrash, explains,

“We have enumerated seven sins, the first leading to the second, and so on, until the seventh, and the process of degeneration is as follows: First, a person does not learn the Torah; then, he subsequently does not fulfill the commandments; he then despises others who do fulfill them; then, he hates the Sages, prevents others from fulfilling the commandments, denies the authenticity of the commandments and finally denies the very omnipotence of G d.”

What is the first mistake? Not studying Torah. If we study Torah consistently then all of our challenges will hopefully dissipate and disappear.

The Centrality of Torah Study

When the Rebbe initiated his now-famous 10-Point Mitzvah Campaign, not surprisingly, at least three of these mitzvot were directly connected to Torah study.

One is the campaign for Jewish homes be filled with Jewish books, starting with the basics: Chumash (the Five Books of Moses), Tehillim (Psalms), Tanya (the fundamental text of the philosophy of Chabad), and a Siddur (prayer book).

Another campaign is to study Torah. Entering a life of Judaism begins, first and foremost, with Torah study. And, as the Rebbe would say, we can spiritually *“conquer the world through Torah study.”*

A third campaign highlights the importance of is to ensure that our children receive an authentic Torah education.

That’s almost 30 percent of the Rebbe’s “starter” mitzvot — yet another indication that a proper Jewish life begins with Torah study.

Daily Study Regimen

Building on an initiative of the Sixth Rebbe, the Rebbe strongly encouraged everyone to study a daily regimen (called *“chitat”*) (involving the study of Torah, Psalms, and Tanya. The Hebrew acronym for these three books is *“chitat.”*)

The weekly Torah portion is divided into seven segments, corresponding to each day of the week. For chitat, we study the first part of the Chumash (together with Rashi’s commentary) on Sunday, progressing through each subsequent part until Shabbat, when we delve into the seventh and final part.

The book of Psalms is divided into 30 parts, one for each day of the Hebrew month, and for chitat, we read the Psalms for that particular day.

The book of Tanya is divided into daily sections covering each day of the year. For chitat, we focus on studying the designated section of Tanya for that day.

The Rebbe stressed that even if we approach the daily study on a superficial or beginner’s level, it still serves to fortify and shield us from potential negativity in our daily lives.

Drawing from a term in the verse *“...and the fear (chitat) of G d was upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue Jacob’s sons,”⁷* the Rebbe explained how Chitat serves as a protective shield, akin to the Divine protection that Jacob and his family received following the terrible episode when Shechem kidnapped and violated his daughter Dinah. (Her brothers Simeon and Levi avenged her, destroying the city of Shechem and killing all its adult male

inhabitants, leading to Jacob's fear of a counter attack(. Instead, the fear of G d overcame the inhabitants of the land, and protected his family. Likewise, the daily study of chitat protects us from life's adversities.

In addition to the daily study of chitat, the Rebbe instituted another daily study regimen involving the works of Maimonides, with three tracks: at the beginner level, one can study Sefer Hamitzvot (the Book of Mitzvot), where Maimonides enumerates the commandments; at the intermediate level, one should study one chapter per day of Mishneh Torah (Maimonides' compilation of Jewish law); and the ultimate objective is to study three chapters every day.

Six Week Challenge

Studying the daily portions of Torah, Psalms, Tanya, and Rambam unquestionably counteracts negativity in one's life. I have witnessed this phenomenon repeatedly.

Over the years, many people have confided in me their personal struggles, expressing sentiments such as, "Rabbi, I am unhappy; I am feeling depressed; I'm not myself; I'm in a bad mood; I can't get things going; I can't get motivated."

To which I consistently reply, "Give me six weeks."

And I explain that I have merited to teach the daily study classes online (now easily accessible at Chabad.org or via your favorite podcast app), and I encourage them to study with me for six weeks.

Study Chumash and Rashi with me; study Tanya with me; study Rambam with me. I promise you that in six weeks, you'll see a difference in your life.

The Perfect Elixir

The second portion of the Shema prayer employs the term *visamtem*, "... and you shall place *visamtem* (these words of Mine upon your heart and upon your soul ...)"⁸ The Talmud⁹ explains that the word *visamtem* can be broken up into two words: *sam tam*, a "perfect elixir" and shares a parable about a man whose son suffered a severe injury. His father applied a bandage and medicine to the wound and said, "My son, as long as this medicine-laden bandage is on your wound and is healing you, eat what you enjoy and drink what you enjoy, and bathe in either hot water or cold water, and you do not need to be afraid, as it will heal your wound. But if you take it off, the wound will become gangrenous."

Similarly, explains the Talmud, G d almighty says to the Jewish people, "*I have created an evil inclination)yetzer hora*."

Humans are prone to temptation. We have a little voice inside of us that can convince us to do almost anything because at the moment of sin we become overcome by a spirit of craziness. We are taught that a person does not sin unless he's temporarily insane. A spirit of folly overcomes him. Then, overcome with regret, he later says, "What did I do?"

"*I've created a yetzer hara, an evil inclination,*" G d continues. "*I created Torah as its antidote.*" The best thing we can do to stay on the straight and narrow, and to bring blessings into our lives, is to study Torah daily!

Work Smart!

The Rebbe addressed the challenge of keeping up with the rigorous daily schedule required by Torah observance. As a Jew, it is important to pray with a quorum each morning, followed by an hour or so of Torah study. If morning prayers at your synagogue are at seven o'clock, and your study session is from eight to nine, then, with a bit of traffic — and if you're here in California, a lot of traffic — you might not arrive at work until 10 a.m. Meanwhile, your colleague or your competition might have started work at seven, giving them a three-hour head start. How can you compete?

The Rebbe emphasized, however, that the distinction lies in the approach: while your competition is working hard, you are working smart. Because you prayed, and because you centered and anchored yourself through Torah study, you will have the ability to focus, and to get more done in less time.

The Torah portion of Bechukotai underscores our greatest gift — and the most powerful and potent weapon at our disposal — Torah study.

As we read the portion of Bechukotai — which includes some of the most powerful blessings of the Torah, as well the admonition; as we experience Pesach Sheni and new beginnings; as we celebrate Lag BaOmer, the holiday of master Torah scholars Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai; as we join together and *shout “Chazak, chazak, venitchazek – be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened”*; as we approach the holiday of Shavuot and the Giving of the Torah, and we prepare for the monumental moment of Revelation at Mount Sinai, let us make a commitment:

Starting today, every one of us will undertake daily Torah study!]emphasis added[

By fortifying ourselves and our environment with daily Torah study, may we merit to become stronger, more committed Jews, and may we merit to greet our righteous Moshiach, may it be speedily in our days. Amem

FOOTNOTES:

1. Leviticus 26:3-4.
2. Hayom Yom entry for 14 Iyar.
3. Psalms 133:1.
4. Zohar, vol. 3, 59b.
5. *Torat Kohanim* 26:18.
6. Leviticus 26:14-15.
7. Genesis 35:5.
8. Deuteronomy 11:18.
9. Kiddushin 30b.

* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6445434/jewish/Torah-The-Great-Antidote.htm

Bechukotai: Quantum Leaps

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Quantum Leaps

I will walk among you; I will be your G-d and you will be My people.)Lev. 26:12(

To “walk” with someone means to have a dynamic, progressing relationship with them. In order for G-d to continuously enhance His relationship to us in this manner, we have to enhance our relationship with Him in a similar manner. The Torah therefore tells us that this “walking” relationship with G-d is possible only “if you advance in My rules,” i.e., through studying the Torah assiduously – beyond what is merely required of us.

Someone in love with something or someone will not be satisfied with a superficial acquaintance with the object of his love, but will obsessively seek to enhance his knowledge of it or them as much as he possibly can. Similarly, aware that the Torah is G-d’s will and wisdom, our love of Him will make us seek to enhance our relationship with Him by plumbing the depths of the Torah as deeply as we possibly can.

Lest we think that making quantum leaps in our relationship with G-d is beyond our ability, G-d reminds us here that “*I am G-d, your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt,*” which means “*who brought you out of all limitations.*” In other words, although making quantum leaps requires our effort, our ability to do this is a gift from G-d.

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d show more and more great miracles in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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* Insights from the Rebbe.

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Shabbat Parashat Bechukotai

5784 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

The Politics of Responsibility

Vayikra sets out, with stunning clarity, the terms of Jewish life under the covenant. On the one hand, there is an idyllic picture of the blessing of Divine favour: If Israel follows God's decrees and keeps His commands, there will be rain, the earth will yield its fruit, there will be peace, the people will flourish, they will have children, and the Divine presence will be in their midst. God will make them free. "I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high." (Lev. 26:13)

The other side of the equation, though, is terrifying: the curses that will befall the nation should the Israelites fail to honour their mission as a holy nation:

"But if you do not listen to Me and do not carry out all these commands... I will appoint over you sudden terror, wasting diseases, and fever, which will make your eyes fail and your spirit languish. In vain shall you sow your seed, for your enemies will eat its yield... And if, in spite of all this, you will still not listen to Me, I shall punish you seven times over for your sins... I will make your sky like iron, your land like bronze... I will turn your cities into ruins... I will lay waste the land... As for the survivors, I will bring such insecurity into their hearts in their enemies' lands that the sound of a windblown leaf will make them run as if they fled the sword; and they will fall, though no one is chasing them. (Lev. 26:14-36)

Read in its entirety, this passage is more like Holocaust literature than anything else. The repeated phrases – "If after all this... If despite this... If despite everything" – come like hammer-blows of fate. It is a passage shattering in its impact, all the more so since so much of it came true at various times in Jewish history. Yet the curses end with the most profound promise of ultimate consolation. Despite everything God will not break His covenant with the Jewish people. Collectively they will be eternal. They may suffer, but they will never be destroyed. They will undergo exile but eventually they will return.

Stated with the utmost drama, this is the logic of covenant. Unlike other conceptions of

history or politics, covenant sees nothing inevitable or even natural about the fate of a people. Israel will not follow the usual laws of the rise and fall of civilisations. The Jewish people were not to see their national existence in terms of cosmology, written into the structure of the universe, immutable and fixed for all time, as did the ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians. Nor were they to see their history as cyclical, a matter of growth and decline. Instead, it would be utterly dependent on moral considerations. If Israel stayed true to its mission, it would flourish. If it drifted from its vocation, it would suffer defeat after defeat.

Only one other nation in history has consistently seen its fate in similar terms, namely the United States. The influence of the Hebrew Bible on American history – carried by the Pilgrim Fathers and reiterated in presidential rhetoric ever since – was decisive. Here is how one writer described the faith of Abraham Lincoln:

We are a nation formed by a covenant, by dedication to a set of principles and by an exchange of promises to uphold and advance certain commitments among ourselves and throughout the world. Those principles and commitments are the core of American identity, the soul of the body politic. They make the American nation unique, and uniquely valuable, among and to the other nations. But the other side of the conception contains a warning very like the warnings spoken by the prophets to Israel: if we fail in our promises to each other, and lose the principles of the covenant, then we lose everything, for they are we.[1]

Covenantal politics is moral politics, driving an elemental connection between the fate of a nation and its vocation. This is statehood as a matter not of power but of ethical responsibility.

One might have thought that this kind of politics robbed a nation of its freedom. Spinoza argued just this. "This, then, was the object of the ceremonial law," he wrote, "that men should do nothing of their own free will, but should always act under external authority, and should continually confess by their actions and thoughts that they were not their own masters." [2] However, in this respect, Spinoza was wrong. Covenant theology is emphatically a politics of liberty.

What is happening in Vayikra 26 is an application to a nation as a whole of the proposition God spelled out to individuals at the beginning of human history: The Lord said

to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you act well, will you not be uplifted? If you fail to act well, sin is crouching at the door; it longs to have you, but you must master it." (Gen. 4:6-7)

The choice – God is saying – is in your hands. You are free to do what you choose. But actions have consequences. You cannot overeat and take no exercise, and at the same time stay healthy. You cannot act selfishly and win the respect of other people. You cannot allow injustices to prevail and sustain a cohesive society. You cannot let rulers use power for their own ends without destroying the basis of a free and gracious social order. There is nothing mystical about these ideas. They are eminently intelligible. But they are also, and inescapably, moral.

I brought you from slavery to freedom – says God – and I empower you to be free. But I cannot and will not abandon you. I will not intervene in your choices, but I will instruct you on what choices you ought to make. I will teach you the constitution of liberty.

The first and most important principle is this: A nation cannot worship itself and survive. Sooner or later, power will corrupt those who wield it. If fortune favours it and it grows rich, it will become self-indulgent and eventually decadent. Its citizens will no longer have the courage to fight for their liberty, and it will fall to another, more Spartan power.

If there are gross inequalities, the people will lack a sense of the common good. If government is high-handed and non-accountable, it will fail to command the loyalty of the people. None of this takes away your freedom. It is simply the landscape within which freedom is to be exercised. You may choose this way or that, but not all paths lead to the same destination.

To stay free, a nation must worship something greater than itself, nothing less than God, together with the belief that all human beings are created in His image. Self-worship on a national scale leads to totalitarianism and the extinction of liberty. It took the loss of more

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than 100 million lives in the twentieth century to remind us of this truth.

In the face of suffering and loss, there are two fundamentally different questions an individual or nation can ask, and they lead to quite different outcomes. The first is, “What did I, or we, do wrong?” The second is, “Who did this to us?” It is not an exaggeration to say that this is the fundamental choice governing the destinies of people.

The latter leads inescapably to what is today known as the victim culture. It locates the source of evil outside oneself. Someone else is to blame. It is not I or we who are at fault, but some external cause. The attraction of this logic can be overpowering. It generates sympathy. It calls for, and often evokes, compassion. It is, however, deeply destructive. It leads people to see themselves as objects, not subjects. They are done to, not doers; passive, not active. The results are anger, resentment, rage and a burning sense of injustice. None of these, however, ever leads to freedom, since by its very logic this mindset abdicates responsibility for the current circumstances in which one finds oneself. Blaming others is the suicide of liberty.

Blaming oneself, by contrast, is difficult. It means living with constant self-criticism. It is not a route to peace of mind. Yet it is profoundly empowering. It implies that, precisely because we accept responsibility for the bad things that have happened, we also have the ability to chart a different course in the future. Within the terms set by covenant, the outcome depends on us. That is the logical geography of hope, and it rests on the choice Moses was later to define in these words:

I call Heaven and Earth as witnesses against you today: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life – so that you and your children may live. (Deut. 30:19)

One of the most profound contribution Torah made to the civilisation of the West is this: that the destiny of nations lies not in the externalities of wealth or power, fate or circumstance, but in moral responsibility: the responsibility for creating and sustaining a society that honours the image of God within each of its citizens, rich and poor, powerful or powerless alike.

The politics of responsibility is not easy. The curses of Vayikra 26 are the very reverse of comforting. Yet the profound consolations with which they end are not accidental, nor are they wishful thinking. They are testimony to the power of the human spirit when summoned to the highest vocation. A nation that sees itself as responsible for the evils that befall it, is also a nation that has an inextinguishable power of recovery and return.

[1] John Schaar, *Legitimacy and the Modern State*, p. 291.

[2] Benedict de Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 2004, ch. 5, p. 76.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

And I shall provide peace in the land and you shall lie down at night without fear.” (Leviticus 26:6)

This Torah portion comes at the end of The Book of Leviticus, called by our Sages “the Torah of the Kohen-Priests” – the religious leadership of Israel whose task it was to minister in the Holy Temple and to teach Torah to the nation. A public remnant of their priestly function exists to this very day, when the Kohanim bestow the priestly benediction upon the congregation during the repetition of the Amidah, every morning in Israel, and during the major Festivals in the diaspora.

The problem with this priestly benediction, however, is the concluding words of the blessing recited by the Kohanim before intoning the benediction: “Blessed art thou Oh Lord our God King of the Universe who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and has commanded us to bless His nation Israel with love.”

What is the significance of these words, “with love”? And if the Kohanim do not feel the emotion of love towards the congregation, does that invalidate their benediction?

Where do we find any kind of parallel for the necessity of an emotion of love as prerequisite for a blessing?

I believe we will discover the answer to our question, as well as the proper interpretation of the priestly benediction, in the process of an investigation into the meaning of the difficult text in the beginning of our Torah portion.

The reading of Behukotai begins: “If you will follow my decrees and observe my commandments..., then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce... You will eat your bread to satiety and you will dwell securely in your land. I shall provide peace (shalom) in the land and you shall lie down at night without fear... A sword will not cross your land. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall before you by the sword. Five of you will pursue a hundred and hundred of you will pursue ten thousand and your enemies will fall before you by the sword...” (Leviticus 26:1-8)

How can I possibly understand this text? On the one hand, the Bible guarantees that if we as an entire nation will follow the Biblical commandments in the land of Israel, the soil will provide you with the requisite nourishment and there will be peace – shalom – in the land; no sword will cross the land. But then, on the other hand, in the very next verse, the Bible tells us that we will pursue our enemies with the sword and a hundred of our men will slay a thousand of the enemy. Is this

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a picture of shalom, of peace? Even if we are defeating our enemy by the sword, this does not mean that we have no casualties at all! This hardly suggests a cessation of the sword altogether!? In this context, what did the Bible mean in its earlier verse, “And I shall provide peace – shalom – in the land” (Leviticus 26:6)?

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra provides the answer with his one-word commentary on the word shalom, peace: benechem, “amongst yourselves”.

The Bible is telling us that if we follow the commandments and live in peace and harmony amongst ourselves in Israel; if there be no swords of internecine civil wars within the nation, then we will be able to soundly defeat any enemy who might rise up from without to destroy us. Shalom means internal peace, the love of our Israelite siblings – which can only come after we vanquish our enemies roundabout!

This is a critical message – especially during this time of the year. The Sages of the Talmud teach us that we must waive weddings, haircuts and group festivities from Passover until Lag B’omer because 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiba died during this period; the Geonim explain that these disciples were killed during the abortive Bar Kochba rebellion against Rome. Their fatal flaw was their lack of respect for each other, because of which that generation was not worthy of the redemption Bar Kochba had been supposed to bring about.

The lesson is the same: only if we Jews are at peace with each other internally will we be able to overcome our external enemies who threaten to destroy us.

And even more to the point, our Biblical portion of Behukotai teaches that the primary meaning of the word shalom is peace within Israel; it is as if the Torah is teaching that our problems with the Palestinians are far more simple to work out than our problems with each other, within the family of Israel!

Now I believe we can resolve our initial query. The priestly benediction requests that “God bless you and keep you; God cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; God lift up His face towards you and grant you peace.” The culmination of the benediction is shalom, peace. The Kohanim introduce the benediction by defining its most important feature: “God has commanded us to bless His nation Israel with love” – not that the Kohanim must feel love when they bless, but that their blessing for Israel is love; that all Jews feel love for one another. Our nation must achieve the internal peace and brotherly love which will make Israel invincible vis a vis their enemies. This is our greatest challenge!

The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersch Weinreb

The Walking Tour

I am the type of person who has always believed that the only way to learn about something important is to buy a book about it. For example, it has been my good fortune to have traveled widely in my life and to have visited many interesting cities. Invariably, I bought guidebooks before each such visit, with detailed itineraries describing the “not to be missed” sites in those cities.

Eventually, I learned that there is a much better way to come to know a new city than to read a book about it. It is more interesting, more entertaining, and more inspiring to simply walk around the city aimlessly. I have even stopped buying those books which provide maps of walking tours around the city. Instead I just wander, and have never been disappointed in the process.

The list of cities which I have aimlessly explored has grown quite long over the years. It includes my own native New York, the holy city of Jerusalem, numerous cities in the United States, and several in Europe such as London, Rome and Prague.

Despite the diversity of these cities, I inevitably end up in one of two destinations: either a used bookstore, or a small park, usually one in which children are playing.

The last time I had this experience, I was quite taken aback and muttered to myself, “I guess my feet take me where my heart wants me to go.”

As soon as those words occurred to me, I realized that they were not my own words at all. Rather, I was preceded in that reaction by two very glorious figures in Jewish history: the great sage Hillel, and no one less than King David. That brings us to this week’s Torah portion, Parshat Bechukotai (Leviticus 26:3-27:34).

The parsha begins: “If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season...”

That is the standard translation of this opening verse. But a more literal translation would begin not, “If you follow My laws,” but rather, “If you walk in My laws.” Most translators understandably choose the word “follow” over the literal “walk” in this context.

But the Midrash takes a different approach. It retains the literal “walk,” and links it to the phrase in Psalms 119:59 which reads, “I have considered my ways, and have turned my steps to Your decrees”. After linking the verse in our Torah portion with this verse from Psalms, the Midrash continues, putting these words into the mouth of King David: “Master of the universe, each and every day I would decide to go to such and such a place, or to such and

such a dwelling, but my feet would bring me to synagogues and study halls, as it is written: ‘I have turned my steps to Your decrees.’”

Long before this Midrash was composed, but long after the life of King David, the rabbinic sage Hillel is recorded by the Talmud to have said, “To the place which I love, that is where my feet guide me.” (Sukkah 53a)

The lesson is clear. Our unconscious knows our authentic inner preferences very well. So much so that no matter what our conscious plans are, our feet take us to where we really want to be. To take myself as an example, I may have told myself when I visited some new city that I wanted to see its ancient ruins, its museums, its palaces and Houses of Parliament. But my inner self knew better and instructed my feet to direct me to the musty old bookstores where I could browse to my heart’s content. Or to off-the-beaten-path, leafy parks where I could observe children at play.

This Midrash understands the opening phrase of our parsha, “If you walk in my laws,” as indicating the Torah’s desire that we internalize God’s laws thoroughly so that they become our major purpose in life. Even if we initially define our life’s journey in terms of very different goals, God’s laws will hopefully become our ultimate destination.

There are numerous other ways suggested by commentaries throughout the ages to understand the literal phrase, “If you walk in my ways.” Indeed, Rabbi Chaim ibn Atar, the great 18th century author of Ohr HaChaim, enumerates no less than 42 explanations of the phrase.

Several of his explanations, while not identical to that of our Midrash, are consistent with it and help us understand it more deeply.

For example, he suggests that by using the verb “walk,” the Torah is suggesting to us that it is sometimes important in religious life to leave one’s familiar environment. One must “walk,” embark on a journey to some distant place, in order to fully realize his or her religious mission. It is hard to be innovative, it is hard to change, in the presence of people who have known us all of our lives.

Ohr HaChaim also leaves us with the following profound insight, which the author bases upon a passage in the sourcebook of the Kabbalah, the Zohar:

“Animals do not change their nature. They are not ‘walkers.’ But humans are ‘walkers.’ We are always changing our habits, ‘walking away’ from base conduct to noble conduct, and from lower levels of behavior to higher ones. ‘Walking,’ progressing, is our very essence. ‘Walking’ distinguishes us from the rest of God’s creatures.”

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The phrase “to walk” is thus a powerful metaphor for who we are. No wonder, then, that this final portion of the Book of Leviticus begins with such a choice of words. All of life is a journey, and despite our intentions, we somehow arrive at Bechukotai, “My laws,” so that we end our journey through this third book of the Bible with these words:

“These are the commandments that the Lord gave Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.”

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

We Toil and They Toil; We Run and They Run – Who Cares How They Toil and Run?

The first Medrash Rabbah in Parshas Bechukotai links the opening pasuk of the parsha, “If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them; then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit” (Bamidbar 26:3) with the pasuk in Tehillim “I considered my ways and returned my feet to Your testimonies.” (Tehillim 119:59).

The Medrash comments: Dovid said, “Master of the Universe, every single day I make a mental calculation and say to myself that I am going to such and such a place.” The Medrash, in other words, is concentrating on the expression Im Bechukotai Teleichu (if you will WALK in My statutes). This is a strange expression. We might expect it to say “If you will OBSERVE my statutes.” Based on the use of the verb Teleichu (walk), the Medrash cites the pasuk in Tehillim which relates that each morning Dovid HaMelech would wake up and think to himself of all the places where he was going to go that day. But Dovid concluded that despite his thoughts and plans, his feet would always bring him to Houses of Prayer and Study. Regardless of his mental thoughts, his feet would automatically always take him to the Beis Medrash.

That is the Medrash Rabbah as we have it. The Kesav Sofer, however, quotes a different version of this same Medrash. In the version that the Kesav Sofer cites, Dovid HaMelech is saying that every morning he woke up planning to go to the theaters, the circuses, and the stadiums but instead his feet took him to the Houses of Prayer and Study.

We can better understand Dovid waking up in the morning and saying “I need to go shopping, I need to go to Walmart, I need to go here, I need to go there, etc.” We can understand some optional errands on his agenda that would take him here and there. But why would Dovid HaMelech want to go into the theaters and circuses and stadiums? This is harder for us to understand. Why would he want to do that?

The Kesav Sofer offers two interpretations. One interpretation is that Chazal say that in future times, all stadiums and theaters are

going to be converted into Houses of Study and Prayer. Dovid HaMelech is saying “Ribono shel Olam, I can’t wait for that day to happen. I want to be able to go to the CONVERTED theaters and stadiums.” The Ribono shel Olam says “No! That will only happen in the distant future. In the meantime, your feet will take you to the real Houses of Study and Prayer.”

That is the first interpretation of the Kesav Sofer. But then he gives an incredible second interpretation: Dovid HaMelech wanted to go to the stadium. He wanted to go to the theaters. Why was that? It is because he wanted to see how athletes act and how sports fans act. He wanted to observe the devotion that an athlete puts into his profession.

When we read about people who are superior athletes, it is amazing to see how many hours a day they spend training to perfect their skills. Such swimmers or gymnasts—sometimes young children—who are competing for Olympic medals, spend an incredible amount of time training with intensity before their competition. It is their life! They spend eight or ten hours a day for years at a time!

Those are the athletes themselves. But also consider the sports fans: The obsession people have for sports cannot be fully described. I know a little bit about the Orioles and the Ravens. Okay, I can’t say I am such a Tzadik that I am totally aloof from that. Fine. But on the radio, it is incredible what happens on the “sports channels.” People can talk about their teams and analyze all the players 24 hours a day, seven days a week! “Draft Day” is like a “three-day-Yom Tov.” It is not even a game! They spend three days speculating who a franchise MAY take to play on the team in the future. Then there is all the analysis—did they choose right or did they not choose right! Maybe they should have picked someone else!

Dovid HaMelech wanted to see what constitutes dedication and what constitutes total involvement in an avocation! What does it mean to love something with all your heart? He said, “I want to go to the theaters and to the circuses because I know that there, I will see examples of total dedication to an avocation—and from there I want to learn how to apply such dedication to my own learning and my own Service to Hashem!”

There is a famous vort from the Chofetz Chaim. At a Siyum Masechta we say “We toil and they toil; we toil and receive reward, they toil and do not receive reward, we run and they run...” The Chofetz Chaim asked “Who cares that ‘they run’? Who cares how ‘they toil’?” He gives the same answer: If someone wants to know what true toil is—look at them! If someone wants to know what true passion is—look at them! This is the type of compassion and commitment we need to bring to our own Avodas HaShem (Divine Service).

That, says the Kesav Sofer, is the interpretation of this Medrash, according to his version of the text.

A New Reading of the Final Pasuk of Sefer Vayikra

The very end of the parsha contains the Mitzvah of Temurah. The Mitzvah takes up no more than a single pasuk in the entire Torah – “He shall not distinguish between good and bad and he should not substitute for it; and if he does substitute for it, then it and its substitute shall be holy, it may not be redeemed.” (Vayikra 27:33). The Halacha is that if a person has designated an animal as an offering and he wants to switch it for another animal, he is not allowed to do that. If he attempts to do it anyhow, the switch does not work and both animals wind up becoming holy.

The next pasuk in the Torah, which is the last pasuk in Sefer Vayikra, is, “These are the commandments that Hashem has commanded to Moshe to deliver to the Children of Israel on Mt. Sinai.” (Vayikra 27:34). The simple reading is that this final pasuk is a general statement referring back to all the mitzvos appearing in Sefer Vayikra. This would be well over 200 mitzvos that are referred to by this pasuk! This includes all the mitzvos of the sacrifices, all the forbidden relationships, the dozens of varied mitzvos that appear in Parshas Kedoshim, all the Mitzvos of Kehuna, the Yomim Tovim in Parshas Emor, and so forth. That would be the simple interpretation—that “Elu HaMitzvos...” in this last pasuk of the sefer is referring to all the mitzvos in Sefer VaYikra.

I saw a comment in the sefer Milchamos Yehuda that perhaps there is another message over here. According to the Milchamos Yehuda, perhaps “Elu HaMitzvos...” is not referring to the conglomeration of all the mitzvos in the Book of Vayikra, but rather it is referring specifically to the two mitzvos with which Sefer Vayikra concludes: (1) The Halacha that if a person donates something to Hekdesh and then he wants to redeem it, he needs to add 20% to the value of the thing he wants to redeem (Vayikra 27:31) and (2) The Halacha of Temura, that if a person tries to switch an animal that he has already declared Kodesh, then the result will be that both the original animal and its ‘replacement’ will be Kodesh!

He quotes the Rambam at the end of Hilchos Temurah: “It appears to me that the rationale behind the Mitzvah of Temurah is similar to the rationale for adding 20% to the value of his house if he redeems it (from belonging to the Bais Hamikdash). The Torah probed into the bottom-line thoughts of a person and a bit of his evil inclination, for the nature of man is to wish to increase his possessions and to be overly protective of his money. And even though he initially vowed and sanctified his property, perhaps he regretted that and now

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wishes to redeem his property back from Hekdesh for less than it is really worth. Therefore, the Torah says (as if imposing a penalty), that if he wishes to redeem his property, he must add a fifth. Similarly, if someone sanctified an animal (with ‘kedushas haGuf’ (body sanctity), he may want to change his mind. He may try to swap this animal for another animal of lesser value. If the Torah would give him permission to ‘upgrade’ his offering, switching an inferior animal for a superior one, he might come to switch a superior animal for an inferior one saying this new one is better. Therefore, the Torah sealed the path before him by not allowing any exchanges and penalizes him for the attempt to make an exchange (such that both animals become holy). This is all designed to mold his evil inclination and to ameliorate his thought processes. This is what the Torah is all about. The majority of the laws of Torah are nothing more than counsel from the Great Counsellor to improve our values and correct our actions.” (Hilchos Temura 4:13)

The bottom line of Torah is to make us into better people with better hashkofos (values), and better middos (character traits). These two mitzvos – adding 20% to redeem Hekdesh, and the penalty for trying to swap a sacred animal – are all about breaking our bad habits, because the Torah knows that human beings tend to be cheap. They don’t want to part with their money. The Torah therefore says to do this to break those habits. These laws are indicative. They tell us about the purpose of all of Torah in general. This is what Torah is about: L’Saken HaDeyos, u’l’yasher ha’masim!

This, according to the Milchamos Yehuda, gives new meaning to the final pasuk in Sefer VaYikra. “Elu HaMitzvos...” is referring to these two mitzvos at the end of Parshas Bechukosai—about Temura and Hekdesh—that are indicative of the purpose of all the Torah’s mitzvos—to improve our values and to correct our actions! Chazak Chazak v’NisChazek.

Dvar Torah Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

We must appreciate our community Rabbis and Rebbetzins.

This important message is presented to us close to the conclusion of the book of Vayikra in a passage in Parshat Bechukotai – a passage in which the theme is valuation.

The Torah tells us that in temple times, if one was to bring an offering and one wanted to place a value on the animal, one brought the animal before the Kohen, the Priest. And then the Torah says (Vayikra 27:12), “K’erkecha hakohen, ken yihyeh.” – “According to the value that the Kohen will give you, so shall it be.”

The Sefer Menachem Zion puts the comma in

a different place in this verse and it transforms the whole meaning of the verse. This is how he reads it: “Ke’erkecha, haKohen ken yihyeh.” – “According to your valuation, so shall the Kohen be.”

He explains that in post-temple times the Kohen is effectively the Rabbi, because our Rabbis and our Rebbetzins are our spiritual leaders and therefore ‘k’erkecha’ means, according to the value that the community places on their Rabbis and Rebbetzins – according to their level of appreciation of them, ‘haKohen ken yihyeh’ – within that context our spiritual leaders can perform well.

There’s a message here for Rabbis and Rebbetzins: it’s all about kiddush Hashem. We need to strive always to achieve the sanctification of God’s name within our communities because so much depends upon the impression the Rabbi gives and upon reputation.

And at the same time, such an important message is given to all members of Jewish communities right across the globe: ‘k’erkecha’ – according to the valuation you give, according to the level of appreciation you have for the Rabbis and Rebbetzins who work tirelessly, full of devotion and commitment to their communities, ‘haKohen ken yihyeh’ within that environment of warmth and appreciation they’ll be able to deliver their best for the community, knowing that they have the confidence of the community all the way.

It’s of great significance that this message is given to us at the conclusion of Sefer Vayikra, a book which is the Torah’s manual all about the worship of God and those who lead us in that worship. So let’s never forget that we should always appreciate our Rabbis and our Rebbetzins.

Why does the name of Jerusalem not appear in the Torah? On 21 separate occasions in the book of Devarim we are told about, “bamakom asher yivchar Hashem,” – “the place which God shall choose,” and we all know that it’s Jerusalem.

Similarly in the book of Bereishit, Malkitzedek who came out to welcome Abraham is described as the king of ‘Shalem’, which was Jerusalem. Abraham sought to sacrifice his son Yitzchak at the akaidah on ‘Har Hamoriah’ (Mount Moriah) which is Jerusalem. It seems as if the Torah’s going out of its way not to mention Jerusalem by name!

The Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim, his Guide to the Perplexed, gives three reasons for this, and the third, which he states is the most powerful, is in order to preserve the unity of the Jewish people.

As the nation came, under the leadership of Joshua, into the Promised Land to possess it, says the Rambam, had they known exactly

where Jerusalem was, there was a danger that there could be civil war – each tribe could fight against the others in an attempt to gain control over that city, and ultimately rule the whole people. Therefore, Jerusalem was hidden from them. The Rambam further says that it was only once a king would be appointed and anointed to rule over the entire people that Jerusalem would be established as the eternal capital of the Jewish nation.

It is clear that King David was aware of the way in which Jerusalem would serve to unify the people. That is why, when he bought the city from Arana the Jebusite, he raised 50 shekels from each of the 12 tribes towards the 600 shekel cost: he wanted them all to have a ‘chelek’, a portion in it, so that it would belong to all.

In addition, through all the ‘mishmarot’, the procedures of the Temple service, there were always representatives of all tribes to guarantee that the temple service ran collectively. We had the half shekel contribution which came from every individual to ensure that Jerusalem and its Temple service would always belong to the entire nation.

No wonder therefore that in Psalm 122 we are told, “Yerushalayim habenuyah k’ir shechubra la yachdav.” – “Jerusalem is built as a city which is joined up by all of its parts.”

The hilltops, the mountains, the valleys, they all join up in order to produce one single city representing the unity of the entire people of Israel.

As we now focus our attention on Jerusalem in anticipation of Yom Yerushalaim, the glorious festival of Jerusalem Day, let us also focus our attention on Jewish unity so that we should be ‘chubra la yachdav’ – totally connected as one entity always.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Blessing and the Curse

Rabbi Netanel Lederberg

The Book of Vayikra ends with the portion of Bechukotai, which describes the covenant between God “and between the Children of Israel in Mount Sinai at the hand of Moshe” (Vayikra 26, 46). This covenant is contingent upon a mutual commitment: if the covenant is observed and the words abided by, the result is great abundance and blessing from heaven. The verses also offer a description of what will happen if there is a breach of covenant.

A similar covenant is mentioned at the end of the Book of Devarim, in the portion of Ki-Tavo, which takes place in the 40th year of the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert. For the second time, the blessings and the curses are recounted, and the description culminates as follows: “These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moshe to make with the Children of Israel in the land of Moav,

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beside the covenant which He made with them in Chorev” (Devarim, 28, 69).

The second covenant, which is mentioned in the 40th year of their wanderings, was due to come into effect at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, both facing the place of burial of Yosef son of Yaakov, whose sale brought about the initial descent to Egypt and the exile which ensued. The fact that this particular spot was chosen for the covenant due to take place in the Land of Israel is of great significance, and paves the road for the People of Israel once they enter the Land.

The first covenant at Horeb [Sinai], mentioned in our portion, took place in the second year following the Exodus from Egypt. It might even have occurred sometime in the first year, right after the giving of the Torah at Sinai (despite the fact that it is only mentioned now in the Book of Vayikra), because there is also mention of a covenant in the portion of Mishpatim: “And he took the book of the covenant and read it in the ears of the people” (Shemot 24, 7). It follows then that a covenant had been entered at Sinai, right after the giving of the Torah.

The fact that Torah talks of a covenant at the end of the Book of Vayikra – and not only at the end of the Book of Devarim – suggests that at the point in time in which our portion takes place, the People of Israel were sure they would be entering the Promised Land at any moment. After the giving of the Torah at Sinai, it was naturally expected that the next step would be entering the Promised Land, working its soil and making it prosper. In keeping with this, the words of the blessings and the curses are very understandable, as they relate to the crops of the land, the agricultural produce and to the livestock. Indeed, if it weren’t for the sins of the Israelites in the summer months of the second year following the Exodus – the sin of the spies, inter alia – they would have entered the Land immediately following the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the building of the Mishkan, which was intended to serve as a place of worship in the Land of Israel. This was supposed to be the natural sequence of events by virtue of the covenant in the portion of Bechukotai. In such case, the Torah could have come to a close in our portion, and the Israelites could have entered the Land of Israel directly. This might explain why the Book of Vayikra ends with a covenant: from this moment on, it is possible to advance and take the steps necessary for realizing the big dream and fulfilling the calling of the People of Israel: settling the Land of Israel.

From a first reading of our portion, we might find it strange that there is such a big discrepancy between the verses that speak of the blessings, and those describing the curses.

Approximately ten verses focus on the blessings that will come upon the People of

Israel “if you follow My statutes and keep My commandments”. These include timely rains, good produce, abundance, security, victory over the enemies and the presence of God in the land. All these promises relate to the settling of the land and to the blessing of the soil. Following this sequence of blessings, we read the verse: “If you hearken not unto me, and do not fulfill all these commandments.” From verse 14 through verse 42 there are 28 verses relating numerous curses such as consumption, fever, loss of crops, famine, pestilence, exile and many more.

Does this lack of proportion mean that the curse is stronger than the blessing? How can we explain this disproportionality? True, later on in the chapter the verses tell us that God will remember His people, and the People of Israel shall return from exile. The reason given for this is that “I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly or break My covenant with them.” Still and all, there is a huge disparity between the dull descriptions of the blessings and the very picturesque descriptions of the curses.

A closer examination of the verses, though, reveals another inherent difference between the verses relating the blessings, and those recounting the curses. This inherent difference might serve to answer the question posed earlier. The verses relating the blessings open with the words – “If you shall follow my statutes” – and are then followed by a plethora of blessings, an unrestrained torrent of abundance. Blessing pours down in great bounty; it springs forth in a great flow of plenty. The blessing cascades as water does, filling every crack and crevice. It showers down unconditionally. With no terms. “If you shall follow my statutes”, the blessing will pour down in its entirety, on everyone.

On the other hand, the verses which talk of the curses describe something else entirely. The first impression may be one of disproportion because there are so many of these verses. However, it is not because there is actually an abundance of curses; rather, the pauses between the different inflictions, and the conditions that have to exist before the next set of curses can come about – all of these create an overwhelming impression. At first, “if you do not follow My statutes”, you will be inflicted with consumption and fever, but no more. The curse ends here.

But then another term is specified – “but if you hearken not unto Me” – if you persevere in your ways, then more trials and tribulations shall befall you. The produce of the land will fail. Another pause here. Only in such case that the situation gets worse – “and if you walk contrary unto Me, and hearken not unto Me; I will bring seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins” – it is then that the beasts of the field shall come upon you. Another pause. The next verse goes on to say “and if in spite of these things you will not be

corrected unto Me, but will walk contrary unto Me” – then there will be graver punishments still: pestilence and famine. But it does not end here either. The Torah goes on to say – “and if, despite all this, you will hearken not, unto me”, there will come upon you, greater inflictions still.

Ultimately, the verses depicting the curses themselves, and not what caused them (i.e., the words “and if you hearken not unto me”) amount to ten or eleven verses – the exact same number of verses that refer to blessings! After each warning of “if you hearken not unto me”, there are only 2-3 verses that actually describe the inflictions, whereas after the opening – “if you follow my statutes” – there are no less than ten verses of blessing!

The seemingly lengthy sequence of verses depicting the curses does not, in fact, denote an abundance of curses; rather, it wishes to convey the idea that curses come about in stages, gradually. In contrast, blessings are showered upon us in great quantities. When blessing comes down to the world, it is not a gradual process; it is not subtle; it is not hesitant. No! It is an outpouring of goodness; glorious in its downpour. “And I shall pour you out a blessing, that there shall be more than sufficiency” (Malachi, 3, 10). The curse, by its very definition, is something incomplete, a hesitation, a feeling of uncertainty regarding the future. It involves constant inspection; unceasing speculation. Curses are confining, restricting; the movement is inward and does not expand outwards. The discrepancy between the blessing and the curse is not only in the outcome – whether there will be rain or drought – but is also expressed in the manner in which things come about – whether they come in an outpouring of abundance, unhindered, or whether there is interruption, constant examination, uncertainty and the inability to be fully present in the here and now, and to feel completely whole.

Let us revert for a moment to the story of those who took part in the actual Exodus from Egypt, the generation that merited a great bounty of blessings because they chose to follow God into the great uninhabited vastness of the desert. An entire nation of slaves, who, only moments before, had emerged from slavery into freedom, saw great miracles; so much so, that even the lowliest handmaid witnessed greater Divinity than did the prophet Yechezkel. The people that left Egypt saw the Ten Plagues of Egypt; the wondrous splitting of the Red Sea; they received manna and quails from heaven; stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah; erected the Mishkan and saw the glory of God dwell within; they witnessed great light and plenitude, were fortunate to have Moshe as their leader, and merited constant Divine revelation. The generation of the Exodus lived in a state of blessing and abundance, as is described in the verses depicting the unceasing blessing. For them, a curse was not only a matter of content;

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rather, a curse was, first and foremost, considered to be anything that evolved gradually, unlike the abundance they were used to. In fact, this state in which things transpire slowly, enabling one to take small steps, was actually intended to give them the opportunity to rectify and reexamine their ways.

In other words, this was a reality in which long-term processes unfolded slowly, taking to task future generations as well, intended also for those who will eventually enter the Land of Israel. Interestingly, in the Book of Devarim, in the portion of Ki-Tavo, the discrepancy between the unhindered and bountiful blessing and the gradual manifestation of the curse, is less extreme. In Devarim the blessings and the curses take on a different form and shape, one more suited to the generation about to enter the Land and work its soil. This generation will have no choice but to take part in longer processes involving the conquering of the Land, settling it, making the name of God known to all, and engaging in Tikkun Olam.

It follows then that the blessing which initially poured down unhindered, with no limitations at a rapid pace, unlike the curses that were gradual and took place in stages – making it possible to repent and put them to a stop – were ultimately replaced by blessings and curses of equal tempo.

Still and all, may we not only merit a myriad of blessings, but also reexperience the special tempo at which blessing is manifest. And may the Divine light shine upon us always

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

The Great Exchange

The closing two mitzvot in Sefer Vayikra deal with ma'aser beheimah. It is a most fascinating mitzvah. The Gemara (Bechoros 58b) describes the process of tithing the kosher animals born to the farmer that year. He gathers them into a corral which has a narrow opening through which he passes them individually, by having their mothers outside and thus they will pass through since they are attracted to their mother's voice. Each one is counted separately until the tenth, which is marked with red dye and then designated as a korban to be eaten by the owner in Yerushalayim.

The obvious question is why did the Torah prescribe such an arduous process? Why not state that as the farmer is told to give a tenth each year of his produce to the Levi for ma'aser rishon, so too is he to tithe his flocks? Let the farmer count all his animals, and then deduct one tenth for ma'aser. This would save him many hours of painstaking activity of dealing with each animal individually.

Rav Pam zt"l quotes Reb Eliezer Gordon zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Telz in Lithuania, who answered very sharply the following psychological insight. Were the Torah to

simply command us to tithe our animals, the farmer would instinctively react and feel that the Torah is asking a great deal from him. However, once he counts each animal individually, he is saying: one for me, two for me, etc. until he gets to nine for me. Then after getting nine for himself, it is much easier to give the tenth as a korban for Hashem. There is a very powerful lesson that emerges from ma'aser beheimah and that is: Hashem gives us so much and asks so little in return. I believe this is a theme and a refrain that we find in several places in the Torah.

The Be'er Yosef in his commentary on Parshas Emor notes, as do many, of the integral connection between the mitzvah of Sefiras Ha'omer and the mon. After all, the first place we find the term omer in the Torah is in regard to the mon, regarding which we were told to collect an "omer la'gulgoles – an omer per person" (Shemos 16:16.) The period between Pesach and Shavuot is known as the omer, as the idea that permeates this time is the lesson of the omer of mon. Do the math: there were at least two million persons in the desert. That means fourteen million omer of mon a week, fifty-six million omer of mon per month, and seven hundred and twelve million per year. Multiplied by forty years, He rained down from Heaven billions of omer during this period. When they came to Eretz Yisrael, Hashem asks that on the second day of Pesach they should show their appreciation by bringing an omer to the Beis HaMikdash. Not as we might have expected, that each individual was to bring an omer, rather one omer is brought on behalf of the entire nation. Moreover, it was not even of wheat, the more expensive grain, rather of barley. The powerful lesson/refrain, teaches the Be'er Yosef, is that He gives us so much and asks for so little in return.

On the day Hashem created man we are taught that Hashem planted a garden in Eden containing every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food. Bereishis (2:16) teaches that He commanded man, according to the translation of the Targum Onkelos, "of every tree of the garden you may freely eat." The Meshech Chochmah understands this verse most differently. He believes that Hashem commanded Adam, giving him a positive mitzvah to eat of the many permissible trees which he maintains would have protected Adam from then violating the negative commandment to not eat from the Eitz Ha'da'as. Upon reflection, it is interesting to note that Hashem gave Adam so much and asked from him so little in return.

This concept is further buttressed by the Yalkut Shim'oni on the verse "mi hikdimani va'ashalem" (Iyov 41:1.) The Medrash teaches that Hashem gives parents a baby boy and only asks for circumcision. Hashem gives us clothing and only asks for tzitzis. Hashem gives us a house and only asks for mezuzah and ma'akeh. Hashem gives us a field and only

asks for pe'ah. Hashem gives the farmer a bountiful harvest and only asks for terumah and ma'aser. Concluding the way we began: Hashem gives the farmer an abundance of flocks and only asks for a tenth in return.

This is truly a challenge: the six hundred and eleventh mitzvah to the Sefer HaChinuch is v'halachta b'drachav, to emulate Hashem, as He, so too we. In our performance of chessed, we are to do more and more, and ask so little in return. The reason I say so little in return is that often allowing the recipient of your chessed to return a chessed is a great chessed in and of itself.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

The Best Hotel Ever

And HASHEM spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying... (Bamidbar 1:1)

The Torah has one entire book of the "Five Books of Moses" with the name "Bamidbar", literally – "In the Desert". What is the relevance to us of learning about the life of the Jewish People in the desert way back then? Why was the Torah given in a barren wilderness? Why was our first 40 years of existence as a new nation spent wandering in a desert far from civilization? Couldn't the Creator of Heaven and Earth find a better hotel for his people? There must have been some major benefits. What were they? What can we learn from life in the desert that can apply to our lives today?

It may prove to be helpful to think in terms of "What would be the ideal setting for learning new ideas, starting fresh, and developing a lasting relationship based on absolute trust?!"

Having just exited the wicked culture of Egypt where we were groomed as slaves for hundreds of years it makes sense that we begin again in a place that is detached from other societal influences. Not only would there be a lot of learning to do, but plenty of unlearning as well.

The story is told about a farmer who came to a tailor to get suited for a new suit for a special occasion. The tailor measured him carefully, they selected a fine cloth together, and an appropriate style. The day of the big event arrived and the farmer came to the big city again to try on his new suit for the big event. The tailor was busy with a customer when the farmer arrived so he handed him the suit and pointed him to the dressing room to put on his brand new professionally tailored suit. The farmer tried with all his might to squeeze the pants on but it was so tight he could hardly breathe when he got them on. He was shouting angrily all the while, "Tailor, what did you do to me?!" Then when he put the jacket on the suit was almost impossible for him to get into.

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His tones became louder and more intense, "Tailor, what have you done to me?!"

When the farmer stepped out of the dressing room, hardly able to move, the tailor and others around broke out into uproarious laughter. The farmer wondered what there was to laugh about. He was upset because not he had no proper clothing for the special occasion that day. The tailor explained, "Silly farmer, before you put on a new suit, it is important first important to take off those bulky overalls!" The Holy Torah needed to be written on fresh parchment and clean souls that are no longer sullied and encumbered by the past or in competition with other cultures. The mind must first be quieted to be receptive to new ideas and ideals.

Nothing grows in a desert. The Jewish people would have to learn to trust HASHEM and only HASHEM with the daily reception of the Manna. That was that perfect food plan and training ground for forging such a relationship of eternal and absolute trust. Learning is based on a trusting relationship, not just mechanically downloading information. This dimension of trust building and relationship bonding would prove to be a critical factor in our early development as a Torah nation.

The Zohar says that if Adam had eaten from the Etz Chaim (The Tree of Life) before eating from the Etz HaDaas Tov V'Ra (The Tree of the Knowledge – Confusion- of Good and Bad") then he would have lived forever in perfection. If he would have tasted Torah first and gained objectivity before being detoured and confused with subjectivity and emotions then he would have been able to successfully navigate the world of subjectivity. It's like reading the instruction manual before putting a model together. Without that instruction manual it is too easy to make mistakes that are often hard and sometimes impossible to undo. Like learning the laws of marriage before marriage actually begins, learning Torah (The Eitz Chaim) in the desert, in advance of entering the Land of Israel and well away from the temptations of the Canaanite culture would be the best way to fix up the oldest mistake in history and give us the greatest chance to succeed in our mission. It really may have been the ideal setting and the best hotel ever!

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash Sicha of Harav Aharon Lichtenstein z"l "Bring Us with Heads Held High to Our Land"

The blessings promised to Bnei Yisrael, if they fulfill God's commandments, are of a dual nature. This is expressed succinctly in the verses: "...You will have your fill of food and you will live securely in the land. I will grant peace in the land so that you will sleep without fear" (Vayikra 26:5,6). Not only will we experience a physical, material prosperity, but we will also be allowed to enjoy these blessings in peace, unthreatened by any outside forces. This psychological state of

well-being is important, both as an end within itself and in terms of the behavior that it produces.

The Ramban explains that a double miracle is guaranteed in the verse (Vayikra 26:8): "Five of you will be able to chase away a hundred, and a hundred of you will defeat ten thousand, as your enemies fall before your sword." God will give us the courage and strength to give chase even when outnumbered, and then to vanquish the foe and destroy him. It is the psychological state of well-being that gives rise to such an inordinate amount of courage and chutzpah!

The blessings are paralleled by the series of curses that will befall the nation, should God's word not be kept: "If you do not listen to me.... I will bring upon you feelings of anxiety, along with depression and excitement, destroying your outlook and making life hopeless... You will flee even when no one is chasing you... You will exhaust your strength in vain, since your land will not yield its crops and the trees of the land will not produce fruit." (Vayikra 26:14-20)

Not only will we be cursed with the decimation of all of our physical assets, but more frightening, we will descend to such a level of fear and insecurity that we will flee even when no one is chasing us. It is sometimes easier to bear hardship when relief is in sight, but the absence of hope can break even the most resilient spirit.

The positive frame of mind with which Bnei Yisrael left Egypt is described in our parasha as "komemiyut" - "with heads held high" (Vayikra 26:13). We did not leave exile in a state of weakness, but rather with pride and strength, and it is no wonder that we include the fervent hope in our daily prayers, "ve-tolikheinu komemiyut le-artzeinu - and bring us with heads held high to our land!" It is this feeling of pride and purpose that has given the Zionist movement much impetus, providing it with the courage to face overwhelming odds time and time again. So long as it does not degenerate into "ge'on uzkhem - your aggressive pride" (Vayikra 26:19), that denies the omnipotence of God, such a positive attitude can bring forth victory from the brink of disaster.

Jewish feelings of nationalism that led to the establishment of the State of Israel often led to an unfortunate denigration of the Diaspora and its values. Nevertheless, the positive value of these nationalistic feelings cannot be underplayed. It is thus disturbing today to see that there are many Jews who do not identify with these feelings of Jewish pride, and who seek to undermine the basis of the State of Israel. This is especially regrettable now, when the State is experiencing unprecedented problems and threats.

The Rambam states (Hilkhot Ta'anivot 1:1-3) that it is incumbent upon the community to cry out and sound the trumpets when they are faced with calamity, in order to arouse them to repent. Failure to see the Hand of God behind their misfortune by ascribing events to chance will only result in a redoubling of their punishment.

A society that is not open to criticism is in great danger morally; hence, the religious community must be aware that there are faults and failings in Israel today. But it must be prepared to tackle these problems, while maintaining a pride and love for Am Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael nonetheless. It is this attitude that will overcome the trials that we are currently facing and result in the fulfillment of our prayers. (*This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat parashat Bechukotai 5755 [1995]. Summarized by Zev Jacobson*)

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

Foundation of Faith: Chapter 5, Verse 1 Chapter 5

The world was created with ten utterances. What does this teach us? Certainly, it could have been created with a single utterance. However, this is in order to make the wicked accountable for destroying a world that was created with ten utterances, and to reward the righteous for sustaining a world that was created with ten utterances.

Ten

This positive value of confrontation has been expressed in a beautiful symbolic manner by a great sage of modern times. Our rabbis of the Talmud categorized the entire period from Creation to Sinai, the revelation of the Torah, as *tohu*, chaos. What they meant was that the world as created by God was only physically complete but had not actualized its moral potential. It came of age morally only with the giving of Torah at Sinai. Now, what is the catalyst that helped in this transformation? What is it that helped the world overcome its amoral character and rise to the level of Sinai? The great Gerer Rebbe identifies this catalyst as the Ten Plagues of which we read today. In epigrammatic fashion, he tells us that the transition from *asarah ma'amarot* to *aseret hadibrot* was effected by *eser makkot*. The world was created through Ten "Words" of God, such as "Let there be light," etc. Creation is therefore symbolized by the Ten Words, and its moral maturity by the Ten Commandments. But it was the Ten Plagues that made this possible. The confrontation of Moses with Egypt succeeded in uprooting the corruption of Egypt, exposing the vacuousness of its nefarious paganism, and therefore allowing Israel to emerge from within it and receive the Torah. Without the Ten Plagues, the Ten Words would never have become the Ten Commandments.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Ten Words

Furthermore, we must be not only discriminating in our words, but sparse as well. Our words must be few and scarce. In all of Judaism, the principle of *Kedushah* is protected from the danger of over-familiarity. When people have too much free access to an object or a place, they gradually lose respect and awe for it. That is why the reader of the Torah will use a *yad*, a silver pointer. That is not used for decorative purposes. It is because of the Halakhah that *kitvei kodesh* *metamin et hayadayim* – that we are forbidden to touch the inner part of the Torah scroll. The reason for this is a profound insight of the Torah into human nature: if we are permitted to touch it freely and often, we will lose our reverence for it. The less we are permitted to contact it, the greater our respect for it. Similarly, the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem was preserved in its sanctity by our tradition when it forbade any person other than the high priest to enter its sacred precincts; and even he might not do so except for one time during the year – on the Day of Atonement.

And so it is with words. The more we use, the less they mean. When our rabbis investigated the first portion of Genesis, they discovered that the world was created by *asarah ma'amarot*, ten "words." Only ten words to create an entire universe! And yet our rabbis were not satisfied. And so they asked, "Could not the world have been created with only one word?" Why waste nine precious words? Indeed, for with words, quantity is in inverse relationship to quality. If there are so many words that you cannot count them, then no individual word counts for very much.

Excerpted from Foundation of Faith: A Tapestry of Insights and Illumination on Pirkei Avot based on the Thought and Writings of Rabbi Norman Lamm, The Gibber Edition, edited by Rabbi Mark Dratch, co-published with Ktav Publishing



BS"D

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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON BECHUKOSAI - 5784

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Home Weekly Parsha BECHUKOTAI

This week's parsha, which concludes the book of Vayikra, deals with the realities of Jewish national and personal life. On one hand it describes in rapturous terms the blessings of happiness, security and serenity that can happen to the Jewish people and to the individual Jew. But on the other hand, it vividly and graphically describes death, exile, and tragedy.

Jewish history bears out the accuracy of both visions. We have lived through both experiences. Jewish history seems to have contained much longer periods of darkness than of light, of more tragedy than of joy and serenity. Though the Torah assigns observance of the commandments as the prime cause of security in Jewish life and non-observance of the same as the cause of tragedy, history and the great commentators to Torah seem to modify this cut and dried axiom.

God's wisdom and judgments are inscrutable and are beyond even elementary comprehension by us mortals. As such we are left wondering as to the tragedies that descended upon the Jewish people and that continue to plague us today. Though there are those amongst us that are prepared to give and accept glib answers to the causes of tragedy, the wise men of Israel warned us against such an approach. Observance of commandments is enormously difficult to fulfill completely and accurately.

As such it is difficult to measure the "why" part of this week's parsha. It is sufficient to note the "how it happened" part to realize that its message of contrasting periods of serenity and tragedy has been painstakingly accurate and contains not one word of hyperbole. The destruction of the Temples, the Crusades and pogroms, the Inquisition and the Holocaust are all graphically described in this week's parsha. Such is the prophetic power of the Torah. In personal life, the longer one lives the more likely tragedy will somehow visit them. The Torah makes provision for this eventuality in its laws of

mourning. We all hope for lives of goodness, and secure serenity. Yet almost inexorably, problems, disappointments and even tragedy intrude on our condition.

In Vayikra, the death of the sons of Aharon remains the prime example of tragedy suddenly destroying a sense of pride, satisfaction and seeming accomplishment. In this week's parsha the description of the punishment of Israel for its backsliding comes after a background of blessings and security. The past century presented the Jewish people with horrors of unimaginable intensity and of millennial accomplishments. The situation of extreme flux in our national life has continued throughout the years of the existence of the State of Israel.

The unexpected and sudden, but apparently regular change of circumstances in national Jewish life mirrors the same situation so recognizable to us from our personal lives. We are constantly blindsided by untoward and tragic events. So, the jarring contrast that the two main subjects of the parsha present to us are really a candid description of life and its omnipresent contradictions, and difficulties. Though we pray regularly for health and serenity, we must always be cognizant of how precarious situations truly are. Thus, as we rise to hear the conclusion of the book of Vayikra, we recite the mantra of "chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek" - let us be doubly strong and strengthen others! So may it be.

Shabbat shalom.
Rabbi Berel Wein

from: The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust <info@rabbisacks.org>

subject: Covenant and Conversation
COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

The Rejection of Rejection BECHUKOTAI

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

There is one aspect of Christianity that Jews, if we are to be honest, must reject, and that Christians, most notably Pope John XXIII, have also begun to reject. It is the concept of rejection itself, the idea that Christianity represents God's rejection of the Jewish People, the "old Israel".

This is known technically as Supersession or Replacement Theology, and it is enshrined in such phrases as the Christian name for the Hebrew Bible, "The Old Testament." The Old Testament means the testament - or covenant - once in force but no longer. On this view, God no longer wants us to serve Him the Jewish way, through the 613 commandments, but a new way, through a New Testament. His old chosen people were the physical descendants of Abraham. His new chosen people are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, in other words, not Jews but Christians. The results of this doctrine were devastating. They were chronicled after the Holocaust by the French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac. More recently, they have been set out in works like Rosemary Ruether's Faith and Fratricide, and James Carroll's Constantine's Sword. They led to centuries of persecution and to Jews being treated as a pariah people. Reading Jules Isaac's work led to a profound metanoia or change of heart on the part of Pope John XXIII, and ultimately to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the declaration Nostra Aetate, which transformed relations between the Catholic Church and the Jews.

I don't want to explore the tragic consequences of this belief here, but rather its untenability in the light of the sources themselves. To our surprise, they key statement occurs in perhaps the darkest passage of the entire Torah, the curses of Bechukotai. Here, in the starkest possible terms, Moses sets out the consequences of the choices that we, Israel, make. If we stay faithful to God we will be blessed. But if we are faithless the results will be defeat, devastation, destruction, and despair. The rhetoric is relentless, the warning unmistakable, the vision terrifying. Yet at the very end come these utterly unexpected lines:

And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their

sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord.

Lev. 26:44-45

The people may be faithless to God but God will never be faithless to the people. He may punish them but He will not abandon them. He may judge them harshly but He will not forget their ancestors, who followed Him, nor will He break the covenant He made with them. God does not break His promises, even if we break ours.

The point is fundamental. The Talmud describes a conversation between the Jewish exiles in Babylon and a Prophet:

Samuel said: Ten men came and sat down before the prophet. He told them, "Return and repent." They answered, "If a master sells his slave, or a husband divorces his wife, has one a claim upon the other?" Then the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the prophet, "Go and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord: Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of My creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.'" Isaiah 50:1; Sanhedrin 105a

The Talmud places in the mouths of the exiles an argument later repeated by Spinoza, the suggestion that the very fact of exile terminated the covenant between God and the Jewish people. God had rescued them from Egypt and thereby become, in a strong sense, their only Sovereign, their King. But now, having allowed them to suffer exile, He has abandoned them and they are now under the rule of another king, the ruler of Babylon. It is as if He has sold them to another master, or as if Israel were a wife God had divorced. Having sold or divorced them, God could have no further claim on them. It is precisely this that the verse in Isaiah – "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you?" – denies. God has not divorced, sold, or abandoned His people. That too is the meaning of the promise at the end of the curses of Bechukotai: "And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away . . . and break My covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God." God may send His people into exile but they remain His people, and He will bring them back.

This, too, is the meaning of the great prophecy in Jeremiah:

This is what the Lord says, He who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar - the Lord Almighty is His name:

"Only if these decrees vanish from My sight," declares the Lord, "Will Israel ever cease being a nation before me?"

This is what the Lord says: "Only if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below be searched out, will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done!"

Jeremiah 31:35-37

A central theme of the Torah, and of Tanach as a whole, is the rejection of rejection. God rejects humanity, saving only Noah, when He sees the world full of violence. Yet after the Flood He vows: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). That is the first rejection of rejection.

Then comes the series of sibling rivalries. The covenant passes through Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau. But God hears Hagar's and Ishmael's cries. Implicitly He hears Esau's also, for He later commands, "Do not hate an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Esau] because he is your brother" (Deut. 23:7). Finally God brings it about that Levi, one of the children Jacob curses on his deathbed, "Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel" (Gen. 49:6), becomes the father of Israel's spiritual leaders, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. From now on all Israel are chosen. That is the second rejection of rejection.

Even when Israel suffer exile and find themselves "in the land of their enemies" they are still the children of God's covenant, which He will not break because God does not abandon His people. They may be faithless to Him. He will not be faithless to them. That is the third rejection of rejection,

stated in our parsha, reiterated by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, axiomatic to our faith in a God who keeps His promises.

Thus the claim on which Replacement or Supersession theology is based – that God rejects His people because they rejected Him – is unthinkable in terms of Abrahamic monotheism. God keeps His word even if others break theirs. God does not, will not, abandon His people. The covenant with Abraham, given content at Mount Sinai, and renewed at every critical juncture in Israel's history since, is still in force, undiminished, unqualified, unbreakable.

The Old Testament is not old. God's covenant with the Jewish people is still alive, still strong. Acknowledgement of this fact has transformed the relationship between Christians and Jews and helped wipe away many centuries of tears.

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Revivim by **Rabbi Eliezer Melamed** (R"Y Har Bracha)

In the Path of the Great Kohanim Pinchas and Matityahu - Revivim

By the merit of Ilan Cohen's heroic self-sacrifice, may his memory be a blessing, we will defeat our enemies * The mitzvah of settling the Land is a general commandment that obligates the entire Jewish people to inherit the Land * In addition to the general commandment, there is a mitzvah upon every Jew to live in the Land of Israel * Only through fulfilling the Torah and mitzvot in the Land is God's name revealed in the world * The obligation to make Aliyah demands that people considered very successful forgo their success, and start rebuilding themselves anew

The Soldier Ilan Cohen, May His Memory Be a Blessing

On Friday, the 9th of Iyar 5784, the soldier Ilan Moshe Cohen, may his memory be a blessing, was brought to burial on Mount Herzl. Ilan grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, received a religious-Haredi education, and at the age of eighteen, recognizing the value of the mitzvah of settling the Land, decided to make Aliyah to Israel, and later, recognizing the value of the mitzvah of serving in the army, decided to join the Har Bracha Hesder Yeshiva. On Wednesday, he fell defending the people and the Land, and his funeral was postponed until his parents arrived in Israel. At three o'clock, immediately after they arrived, the funeral began on Mount Herzl. Being a lone soldier, his friends and Aliyah emissaries asked the public to attend the funeral. Thousands of Jerusalem residents came on the eve of the holy Shabbat to bestow honor upon Ilan, may his memory be a blessing, and to participate in his funeral. Together with them were Ministers Ofir Sofer, Orit Struck and Idit Silman, and Members of Knesset Amit Halevi and Eli Avidar. These are the words I spoke in eulogizing him on Mount Herzl.

The Eulogy

Dear and holy Ilan Cohen. We had hoped that by the merit of the great mitzvah you fulfilled in your Aliyah to the Land, you would merit long life, establish a large family, raise sons and daughters in our cherished ancestral Land, bring joy to your family in Argentina – and now they have been urgently summoned to board a plane to attend your funeral.

In Buenos Aires, you had everything – family, a comfortable life, fluency in the language – yet you chose to leave it all behind and make Aliyah, to bestow grace upon the soil of our holy Land, and to fulfill with your body, the mitzvah that our Sages said is equivalent to all the mitzvot – the mitzvah of settling the Land. You knew that the enemy threatens Israel, and you decided to enlist in the army to defend your brethren, in the Paratroopers Brigade. You had ten free days before your enlistment, and you utilized even those to volunteer at a farm engaged in settling the Land, rising at five in the morning to go out to shepherd sheep, until close to your enlistment date.

As a new, lone immigrant, your army service was more difficult for you, but you did not give up, and even when it was difficult for you during marches, you quietly, and humbly, continued carrying your load. To your friends, the select individuals who made Aliyah with you from Argentina and enlisted in combat units, you said: "It is better to talk and complain less, and to act and help more." Thus, despite the difficulties, you became an outstanding soldier. You absorbed your foundation in your family and the warm Jewish community in Argentina, which has love for the Torah and tradition, and a

warm connection to the people, and the Land. And you continued walking this path with self-sacrifice until the end.

Our Sages taught us that any Jew who is killed for being a Jew is called *kadosh* (holy), and is assured a place in the World to Come. In his death for being a Jew, he shed his private garments and cloaked himself in the holiness of Israel. How much more so one who chose to risk his life defending the people and the Land, and saving many lives. And our Sages said: “Whoever saves a single Jewish life, it is as if he has sustained an entire world” (Sanhedrin 4:5), how much more so, one who fought to save the entire people.

There are those who claim that the tribe of Levi is exempt from the mitzvah of military service. But Ilan, the Kohen, followed in the path of the great Kohanim – Pinchas son of Elazar the Kohen who fought against Midian, and Matityahu the Kohen and his Hasmonean sons who fought against the Greeks, for in truth, the Kohanim always volunteered to go at the head of the soldiers to fight Israel’s wars.

For two thousand years, Jews were killed in exile for the sanctification of God’s name; they lived in humiliation, and died in agony, yet they consented to suffer it all out of faith that a day would come when the words of the Torah would be fulfilled in Israel, and the Jewish people would return to their Land, to bring God’s word and blessing to the world.

The days they dreamed of are being realized through the merit of all the immigrants and warriors who sacrificed their lives for the settlement of the Land and its defense, from the Hasidim of the Baal Shem Tov and the disciples of the Vilna Gaon, who made Aliyah to the Land two hundred years ago, until the dear youth making Aliyah today. Through the merit of all the holy martyrs who sacrificed their lives in settlement and defense, the words of the Torah are being fulfilled in us: “And the Lord your God will return your captives and have mercy upon you, and He will return and gather you from among all the peoples to which the Lord your God has scattered you... And the Lord your God will bring you to the Land which your forefathers possessed, and you will possess it, and He will do you good and multiply you more than your forefathers” (Deuteronomy 30:3).

In exile, we were not privileged to bury our dead with honor. They remained scattered along the sides of all the communities to which they wandered, and when they were forced to flee, they left them among the wicked who banished them, consoling themselves that in *gilgul mechilot* (rolling through underground passages), they would return to the Land. Today, we are privileged to bury Ilan Cohen with a state ceremony in Jerusalem the Holy City, on Mount Herzl, in the presence of ministers and members of Knesset. In this world, Ilan Cohen and all the holy ones buried on this mountain appear to be dead. But in the World of Truth, they are very much alive, and their lives are exceedingly long, for everything built among the people and in the Land, draws from their strength. All the weddings and births are through their strength; all the Torah and divine service, through their strength.

By the merit of Ilan’s self-sacrifice, we will defeat our enemies. By the merit of his self-sacrifice, the deep and warm connection of the Jewish community in Argentina to the Land of Israel will be strengthened. Thanks to him, many more will make Aliyah to settle the Land and fulfill his aspiration, and thanks to him, all his friends and acquaintances will establish large, blessed families in our cherished ancestral Land. And through this, the bereaved, beloved parents will merit to be consoled with the consolation of Zion and Jerusalem, as the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “They shall come and shout on the heights of Zion, radiant over God’s bounty— over new grain and wine and oil, and over sheep and cattle. They shall fare like a watered garden, they shall never languish again. Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeps for her children, she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone. Thus said the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor, says the Lord, and they shall return from the enemy’s land. There is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children shall return to their borders” (Jeremiah 31:12-16).

The Mitzvah of Settling the Land

To elevate his soul, I will summarize an answer I wrote on the question of whether there is an obligation upon every Jew in the world to make Aliyah to the Land of Israel (you can find the full answer in the ‘Revivim’ article of Issue 893, in the ‘Besheva’ newspaper, titled “The Obligation to Make Aliyah to the Land”).

A: The mitzvah of settling the Land is a general commandment that obligates the entire Jewish people to inherit the Land, meaning to impose its sovereignty over it, and settle it in the best possible way from all perspectives (Numbers 33:53-54), and as Ramban (Nachmanides) defined the mitzvah: “We were commanded to inherit the Land that the Exalted God gave to our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and not to leave it in the hands of other nations, or desolate” (Hasagot to Sefer Hamitzvot, mitzvah 4). From the commandment upon the entire Jewish people to settle the Land, a mitzvah is derived that obligates every individual Jew to live in the Land, since the general Jewish people cannot fulfill the mitzvah of settling the Land unless every individual is a full partner in the obligation of the mitzvah, until the vast majority of Israel actually resides in the Land. And we have likewise learned that according to the Torah, the obligation to fulfill the mitzvot contingent on the Land that are associated with the community, such as *challah*, tithes and *terumot*, depends on the majority of the Jewish people residing in its Land (Maimonides, Laws of Terumot 1:1-3, 26; Peninei Halakha: Kashrut 12:10-11).

In addition to the general commandment that the Land be under Israeli sovereignty and the vast majority of Israel reside in it, there is a mitzvah upon every individual Jew to live in the Land of Israel, even at a time when idolatrous gentiles rule the Land (Ketubot 110b; Maimonides, Laws of Kings 5:12; Laws of Married Life 13:20).

A Mitzvah Superior to Regular Mitzvot

There are those who argue that according to Ramban, the mitzvah of settling the Land is binding at all times, but according to Rambam, it was only binding in the past, and therefore Rambam did not count the mitzvah of settling the Land among the 613 mitzvot. However, the truth is that Rambam did not count the mitzvah of settling the Land because it is more important than a regular mitzvah, and as he explained in the introduction to his Sefer Hamitzvot, it is not fitting to count the overarching commandments that encompass the entire Torah (as elaborated in ‘Eim HaBanim Semeichah’, Chapter 3, Paragraph 7-10).

Indeed, the general mitzvah of settling the Land which underlies many other mitzvot, is reflected through numerous mitzvot. In addition to all the mitzvot that are directly contingent on the Land, such as tithes and *terumot*, the mitzvah of establishing a monarchy depends on the Land of Israel, and its purpose is to establish a regime that will express the sovereignty of the Jewish people over its Land, and organize its life in the best possible way (Deuteronomy 17:14-20; HaEmek Davar of the Netziv, *ibid.*; Mishpat Kohen 144). Likewise, the mitzvah of building the Holy Temple and all the mitzvot associated with the Temple. The mitzvah of settling the Land also underpins the entire system of mitzvot related to the judicial system, the observance of festivals, and the roles of the Kohanim and Leviim.

Moreover, the entire Torah and its mitzvot were intended to be fulfilled in the Land, for it is only through their observance in the Land that God’s name is revealed in the world, to the extent that our Sages said that the observance of mitzvot outside the Land is meant for us to remember to fulfill them when we return to the Land (Jerusalem Talmud Shevi’it 6:1; Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 37a; Sifrei Ekev 43-44).

The Claim of the Igrot Moshe

There are those who argue that although it is a great mitzvah to live in the Land, there is no obligation to make Aliyah to it (Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer 1:102). However, as we have learned from our Sages, it is in fact an obligatory mitzvah, and therefore, for example, our Sages ruled that when one spouse wishes to make Aliyah to the Land, the other is obligated to accede to his/her request, and if not, this constitutes grounds for divorce (Maimonides, Laws of Married Life 13:20; Shulchan Arukh, Even HaEzer 75:4). Admittedly, during the years of exile, the rabbis did not encourage Aliyah to the Land, but this was because generally, making Aliyah and living

in the Land were fraught with grave dangers, to the point that for those living in exile, it was considered a case of coercion that exempted them from fulfilling the mitzvah. But it did not occur to them that a time would come when Jews would be able to sustain themselves in the Land and there would be those who would argue that it is not an obligatory mitzvah. And even in those difficult days, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (Kuzari 2:24) wrote that one had to make a far greater effort to make Aliyah to the Land, and without doing so, our prayers were "like the speech of a parrot, and the chirping of a starling."

Would I Have Withstood the Test?

I must add: This is the halakha, but unfortunately, I do not know if I would be capable of withstanding the test of making Aliyah to the Land if I had been born in exile. For even when it is possible to live in the Land, it is extremely difficult to leave a familiar place of residence where one knows how to best express oneself, how to educate children, and how to earn a livelihood, and move to a place where one would have to learn the language, and all the different ways of life. The obligation of making Aliyah to the Land demands that those considered very successful forgo their success, and start rebuilding themselves anew. Therefore, I hold in such high regard the immigrants from the United States and Western countries, and especially the young immigrants who enlist in the army and sacrifice their lives, together with all the heroic soldiers, for the salvation of the people and the Land. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

from: Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org>

date: May 30, 2024, 7:01 PM

subject: Tidbits for Parashas Bechukosai in memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZTL

Parashas Bechukosai • May 31st • 24 Iyar 5784

This week is Shabbos Mevorchim Chodesh Sivan. Rosh Chodesh is on Friday, June 7th. The molad is Friday morning 12:25 AM and 9 chalakim.

Pirkei Avos: Perek 5

Daf Yomi - Friday: Bavli: Bava Metzia 93

The Sheloshes Y'mei Hagbalah are Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, June 9th-11th.

Shavuot begins Tuesday evening, June 11th.

BECHUKOSAI: Reward for following the Torah • The Tochachah, admonition against abandoning the Torah and the details of the punishment for doing so • The laws of Arachin and Hekdesh • See Taryag Weekly for the various mitzvos • Chazak Chazak V'nis'chazeik!

Haftarah: The haftarah of Parashas Bechukosai (Yirmiyah 16:19 - 17:14) contains a theme similar to the parashah - those who adhere to the mitzvos will be rewarded with great blessings, while those who abandon the path of Torah will be punished.

"וְהָאֲרֶזֶן יִתֵּן פְּרִי" בְּכֹל יוֹם יִתֵּן הַשָּׂדֶה יְתֵן פְּרִי

"The earth shall give forth its produce and the tree of the field shall give forth its fruit" (Vayikra 26:4)

As reward for observing the mitzvos, the Torah promises that the land will produce fruit and a person will have sustenance. In Parashas Ki Savo (Devarim 28:3-8) however, the Torah promises even more, describing tremendous wealth and abundance for one who keeps the mitzvos. What accounts for the difference in the description of the reward?

In his sefer, Taamah Dikra, Rav Chaim Kanievisky zt"l explains that in Parashas Ki Savo, the Torah is addressing Klal Yisrael in general, for whom abundance and wealth is considered a great blessing. The pesukim in our parashah however, are referring to talmidei chachamim, as Rashi explains, "Im bechukosai teileichu", is referring to Amalei Torah, those who toil in Torah. For talmidei chachamim, material abundance of wealth can be a distraction and a hindrance to their spiritual pursuits rather than a blessing. The pasuk instead accords the greatest blessing to a talmid chacham, that he simply has no less and no more than he needs. The greatest blessing of all is to have precisely what one truly needs for one's own material and spiritual well-being.

We noted above that receiving the aliyah of the tochachah is considered a "bad siman". Rav Chaim himself once told of a talmid chacham in Bnei Brak who received a large monetary inheritance. Shortly thereafter, his newly-found wealth prevented this talmid chacham from remaining in learning full-time. Rav Chaim mentioned that this talmid chacham had once scoffed at the idea that receiving the tochachah aliyah is a "bad siman", and insisted on taking the aliyah. "You see," concluded Rav Chaim, "he did have an unfortunate end!"

from: **Rabbi YY Jacobson** rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net

date: May 30, 2024, 5:26 PM

subject: **Saying Goodbye to Your Old Perception of G-d - Essay by Rabbi YY**
The Endless Quest

A story:

It was Simchat Torah, and the disciples of Rabbi Mendel of Horodok [Vitebsk], many of whom had journeyed for weeks to spend the joyous festival with their Rebbe, were awaiting his entrance to the synagogue for the recital of the Atah Hor'eisa verses and the hakafot procession. Yet the Rebbe did not appear. Hours passed, and still Rabbi Mendel was secluded in his room.

Finally, they approached Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who had studied with Rabbi Mendel in Mezeritch under the tutelage of the Great Maggid[1]. Perhaps Rabbi Schneur Zalman, who was revered and loved by Rabbi Mendel, would attempt what no other chassid would dare: enter the Rebbe's room and ask him to join his anxiously awaiting followers.

When Rabbi Schneur Zalman entered Rabbi Mendel's study, he found the chassidic master deeply engrossed in his thoughts. "The chassidim await you," said Rabbi Schneur Zalman. "Why don't you join them for the hakafot?"

"There are a hundred meanings to the verse Atah Hor'eisa," cried Rabbi Mendel, "And I do not yet fully understand them all. I cannot possibly come out to recite the verse without a proper comprehension of its significance!"

"Rebbe!" said Rabbi Schneur Zalman. "When you will reach a full comprehension of the hundred meanings of Atah Hor'eisa, you will discover another hundred meanings you have yet to comprehend..."

"You are right," said Rabbi Mendel, rising from his seat. "Come, let us go to hakafot." Throwing Out the Old?

An interesting verse in this week's second portion, Bechukosei, reads[2], "You will eat the very old [grain] and you will remove the old to make way for the new."

A homiletic interpretation of the verse understands "the very old" to symbolize G-d, who has "been around" since time immemorial and who represents eternity. One ought to eat and satiate one's hunger with "the very old" G-d [3].

Yet there comes a time in our life when we need to "remove the old to make way for the new." We should never get stuck in our old definitions of G-d. We must be ready to abandon our old perception of G-d for the sake of a more real and mature relationship with ultimate reality.

It is not always easy, but this is the path forward.

Our old definitions of G-d can become traps which stifle our creativity, hinder our growth, and keep us stuck in the quagmire of our fears, traumas and insecurities. G-d can become an opium, an excuse for not allowing ourselves to be challenged in a genuine way. Religion sadly becomes the factor which holds us back from an honest assessment of our lives and the courage to rethink our mistakes or dysfunction.

The only definition of G-d in Judaism is that He has no definition. This means that a relationship with G-d is the readiness to challenge every comfort zone, every addiction, every fixed paradigm. It is the openness to mystery and to the ultimate knowledge that "I do not know."

Spiritual Frustration

A little while ago, a man approached me one morning in the synagogue and expressed his anguish over the fact that he does not experience G-d anymore in his life.

"When I originally became a baal-teshuvah (returnee to Jewish observance) many years ago," he said, "I felt an intimate relationship with G-d. I sensed His truth and His depth. "Today," the man continued, "I am still a practicing Jew. I put on teffilin each morning, I pray three times a day, I keep the Sabbath and I don't eat shrimp. But G-d is absent from my life. "How do I become a baal-teshuvah again?" the Jew wondered.

As I looked up at his face, I noticed a tear in his eye. I thought that he may be far better off than many people born and raised as observant Jews who have never shed a tear over G-d's absence from their lives. Many of us are even unaware of the fact that there exists a possibility to enjoy a genuine personal relationship with Hashem.

In the midst of our emotional conversation, I noticed on the table a 200-year-old Chassidic work titled "Noam Elimelech." I opened the book, authored by the 18th century Chassidic sage Rabbi Elimelech of Liszensk [4], and randomly arrived at the Torah portion of this week, Bechukosai.

In his commentary to the first verse of the portion, the Chassidic master discusses an apparent lack of grammatical accuracy in the blessings that we recite daily. "Blessed are You, Lord our G-d," we say, "Who has sanctified us with His commandments." Why do we begin the blessing by addressing G-d in second person, "Blessed are You," and then conclude it by addressing Him in third person, "Who has sanctified us with His commandments."?

The Paradox

In the beginning of one's spiritual journey, writes the saintly author, when first discovering G-d in one's life, Hashem seems very near. At that special moment of rediscovery, you feel that you "have G-d," that you grasp His depth, His truth, His grace. You and G-d are like pals. You cry to Him, you laugh with Him, you are vulnerable in His midst. Like one who is reunited with a best friend not seen in many years, you declare: "G-d! You're awesome." "Blessed are You."

But as you continue to climb the ladder of spiritual sensitivity, you come to discover the gulf between you and infinity. This is not a sign of distance, but of closeness.

When you become close to truth, you can begin to sense how far you are from truth.

A deeper relationship with G-d allows you to sense the void and the distance. That void becomes the womb where a new relationship can be born[5].

Far But Near

It is this state of mind that the Prophet Isaiah is addressing when he says [6], "Peace, peace to him who is far and near, and I will heal him." How can one be both "far and near" simultaneously?

The Chassidic master Rabbi Elimelech answers that Isaiah is referring to the Jew who feels that he is far, but in truth he is near. The very fact that one senses is remoteness is indicative of his closeness. If he truly were to be distant, he would actually feel close!

When the first Jew Abraham is taking his son Isaac to the Akeida (the binding of Isaac) atop the sacred Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, the Torah tells us[7] that "On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Abraham said to his attendants, 'You stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder, we will prostrate ourselves and then return to you.'"

Why did Abraham take his attendants along if he was to leave them behind anyway?

Because it was only Abraham who "looked up and saw the place from afar." Only Abraham realized how remote he still was from the Divine mountain. His attendants, on the other hand, actually thought that the place was near. At that moment, Abraham became aware of the vast sea separating his spiritual state from theirs; he knew that they were not ready yet to accompany him on his journey toward G-d.

Thus is the paradox of one's spiritual process. The closer you become, the further you must become. It is to this Jew, harboring deep humility and frustration, that G-d sent forth His promise: "I will heal he who is far and near."

[1] Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Horodok (also called Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk) and Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi were both disciples of the Great Maggid, Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch, the second leader of the Chassidic movement. Following the Maggid's passing in 1772, Rabbi Schneur Zalman regarded Rabbi Mendel as his master and mentor. In 1777, Rabbi Mendel led a group of more than 300 chassidim to settle in the Holy Land. Rabbi Schneur Zalman was originally part of the group, but Rabbi Mendel convinced him to remain behind and assume the leadership of the chassidic community in White Russia and Lithuania. This story and footnotes I copied from: <https://www.meaningfullife.com/atah-horeisa/> [2] Leviticus 26:10. [3] See Bas Ayin on Bechukosei (by Chassidic master Rabbi Avraham Dov of Avrutch. Rabbi Avraham passed away in 1841 in Sefad.) [4] Passed away in 1787. Rabbi Elimelech was a disciple of the Maggid of Mezrich and was considered to be one of the greatest tzaddikim of his generation. [5] This point is also quoted in the name of the Baal Shem Tov (Kesser Shem Tov section 39.) Cf. Tanya section 3 chapter 7. [6] Isaiah 57:19. [7] Genesis 22:4-5.

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/390743>

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A message to Jews throughout the world

Dear bothers, face reality. Don't fool yourselves. The city is going up in flames.

Yosef Mendelevich

During my eleven years in Soviet prisons for attempting to hijack an airplane to escape to freedom in the Land of Israel, one of the things which kept my faith strong was a postcard which I received from my sister who had managed to immigrate to Eretz Yisrael. The postcard pictured a sun-filled landscape of the Promised Land. For me it was proof that my dream was real and possible to achieve if I did not surrender to the obstacles in my path. Today I am a grandfather in Jerusalem. My sons and sons-in-law are soldiers in Tzahal. The struggle for the Land of Israel continues.

I call upon all of you, Jewish brothers and sisters throughout to world, to come join us in protecting our Land and our Nation and in further actualizing a dream of 2000 years.

There are people who have a sweeping vision of history. They are able to predict historical developments which will bring about great change in the

world. One such world-changing event was the exile of the Jewish People from its ancestral Homeland.

For nearly 2000 years our nation suffered a long and difficult wandering from one foreign land to the next without any national sovereignty of our own. We suffered through the Crusades; the Inquisition and expulsion from Spain; the revolutions in Russia with endless pogroms against Jews; and the horrors of the Nazi regime.

Today, one does not have to be a prophet to understand that the world is undergoing another historical revolution which will have far-reaching implications.

For example, Europe is experiencing Muslim infiltration via a vast Muslim immigration, the goal of which is to conquer the modern Western world. As a reaction to the massive Muslim intervention, Europeans have begun fighting against the Islamic revolution they face in order to save common Judiac-Christian values from becoming lost and forgotten.

In a similar fashion the Woke movement in the United States is trying to eradicate traditional American values.

These extreme and fanatic movements for change invariably adopt an anti-Semitic slant. Jew hatred becomes the fashion of the day. As we have learned many times the hard way, this anti-Semitism can lead to violence and worse.

It is a natural tendency for people to avoid the need to face unpleasant realities. People choose to placate themselves with the thought that everything will pass by without painful repercussions. However our Sages teach that the wise person sees the "nolad" - the future situation that the present will lead to. An intelligent person with a knowledge of history and the ability to perceive matters clearly realizes that the present state of mankind is no passing fad. The present situation threatens every Jew in the world and his family.

The only place that a Jew can feel safe is in the State of Israel, even though we are at war, because here a Jew can hold a gun with an army of Jewish soldiers by his side and fight to defend his life and the life of the Jewish Nation.

There is a ballad that was sung in Poland before the Holocaust. "Our city is in flames. Why do you stand with your hands in your pockets? No one will save you. You must save yourselves. Open your eyes and see - the enemy already has conquered half of the city. Don't stand by and do nothing on the side." To my sorrow, people didn't listen to this truthful warning. They hoped that perhaps the danger would pass. Alas, raging conflagrations don't die away by themselves.

Dear bothers, face reality. Don't fool yourselves. The city is going up in flames. Come home to Israel where we will be together and where we can triumph over the terrible evil confronting us with our weapons and with our faith.

Am Yisrael Chai!

Yosef Mendelevitch is a refusenik from the former Soviet Union, also known as a "Prisoner of Zion" and now a rabbi living in Jerusalem who gained fame for his adherence to Judaism and public attempts to emigrate to Israel at a time when it was against the law in the USSR.

from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org>

date: May 30, 2024, 4:36 PM

subject: Rav Frand - Focusing In on The Opening Words of the Parsha - Part 1: Teleichu

Parshas Bechukosai

Focusing In on The Opening Words of the Parsha - Part 1: Teleichu

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1293 - A Tragic Holocaust Shailah. Good Shabbos!

My thoughts this week all revolve around the opening words of Parshas Bechukosai:

The parsha begins (Vayikra 26:3) with the words "Im bechukosai teleichu" (If you go in my decrees). Rashi at the beginning of the parsha notes that these words cannot refer to simple mitzvah observance because that is

covered by the continuation of the pasuk – “v’es mitzvosai tishmeru” (and My commandments you shall keep). Rather, Rashi says that the words indicate “she’tee’he’yu ameillim b’Torah” (that you should be laboring in the Torah) – indicating that a person must sweat in his effort to study and master Torah learning.

My first thought focuses on the word teleichu. Why is the verb teleichu (you go) associated with intense learning?

Rav Meir Shapiro, the Lubliner Rav, founded the famous Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. The entrance exam to the yeshiva was knowing 300 blatt of Gemara by heart. The smicha exam at the yeshiva was 1000 blatt of Gemara by heart. I don’t know how many bochrim today would be accepted to such a yeshiva. Rav Meir Shapiro also founded the now widely-adopted Daf Yomi program. Besides everything else, he was a master darshan (a tremendous speaker).

For the building dedication of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, Rav Meir Shapiro had a pasuk engraved on the walls of the Yeshiva building: “Go my children (Lechu banim), listen to me, I will teach you the fear of Hashem.” (Tehillim 34:12) The obvious question on that pasuk is why does it say Lechu banim – Go my children? Shouldn’t it say Bo’u banim... Come my children? Rav Meir Shapiro explained that the proof of whether a person has succeeded in learning – whether he became a talmid chochom or a yareh shamayim or a ben Torah – is not while he is in a yeshiva. The proof is after he has left the yeshiva. If the yeshiva made an impression on him such that he is a ben Torah, an honest Jew, and a Jew who fears Heaven – even after he has left the yeshiva, that proves that the yeshiva has done its job in properly educating him.

As long as a person remains in yeshiva, the peer pressure and social pressure may be keeping him in check. People do not like to stand-out, so they toe the line. But when they are out of yeshiva, then the proof is in the pudding. That is what the pasuk means when it says: Go my sons.... “After you leave the yeshiva, I want to see if I can in fact recognize the type of person my yeshiva is supposed to produce through your behavior.”

Rav Meir Shapiro added that this is what limud haTorah is all about. Limud haTorah is about the impression Torah makes on the person and how it forms him. Does he become a different person? Therefore, “Lechu banim (Go out, my children).”

Based on this observation, the Tolner Rebbe says as follows. Perhaps this explains why the pasuk at the beginning of our parsha also uses the verb “Bechukosai teleichu” in reference to toiling in Torah study. Perhaps it is because a person’s essence is recognizable when he is already teleichu – on the way, when he is already “out there in the world.” The true mark of the impact a person’s Torah study made upon him is how he acts in the business world and how he acts in the secular world when he is not within the four walls of the beis hamedrash. That is why the pasuk at the beginning of our parsha uses a verb indicating being on the road rather than a verb such as tishma’u (you shall listen) or tavinu (you shall understand).

The Tolner Rebbe then mentions a beautiful story involving the Pnei Menachem (Rav Pinchas Menachem Alter, the seventh Gerer Rebbe, 1926-1996). When the Pnei Menachem was a very little boy, his father – the Imrei Emes (the fourth Gerer Rebbe) – taught him the siddur. The Imrei Emes taught him how to daven and the proper sequence of the prayers throughout the siddur. This was before the young child was even ready to study Chumash or Mishnayos. When he got to Krias Shma sh’al hamita, the Imrei Emes explained to his son that this was the prayer recited before going to bed at night. The little Pnei Menachem asked his father “Why do we say Krias Shma sh’al hamita BEFORE we get into bed if it is called Krias Shma sh’al hamitah (literally — the reading of Shma upon the bed)? “Al hamitah” implies, he asked, that a person should say it when he is already IN bed! The Imrei Emes answered his little son: Krias Shma represents acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. A person cannot accept the yoke of Heaven while stretched out in bed. That does not work. Therefore, it needs to be said before you actually lie down. The young son persisted: then why is it CALLED Krias Shma sh’al hamita (upon the bed), it should be called Krias Shma sh’lifnei hamita? The Imrei Emes told him it is because when a person

actually lays down in bed is when we see what affect the past day’s learning had on him. Even the “al ha’mita” – the sleep – should become a different sleep. The sleep itself should be infused with kedusha because its purpose is for you to be strong and be well and fortified to serve Hashem properly the next day.

Lechu banim shimu li – Go my children, listen to me: When you are on the way, when you are driving, that is when we see what kind of Jew you really are. Im bechukosai teleichu – in the going (haleecha) – we recognize what a person’s toiling in Torah has accomplished.

Focusing on The Opening Words of the Parsha – Part 2: Bechukosai
My second observation reflects on the second word in the pasuk: Im bechukosai teleichu – If in my decrees you go (upon which Rashi comments, as mentioned before, “you should toil in Torah study”). There is an obvious question that many commentaries ask. In fact, in the beginning of this week’s parsha, the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh provides 42 different explanations of “Im bechukosai teleichu – she’tee’heyu ameillim b’Torah” (that you should be laboring in the Torah) – indicating that a person must sweat in his effort to study and master Torah learning.

A chok (decree) is a law whose reason is unknown. Examples of chukim include shantnez, chazir, neveilah, and Parah Adumah. However, the mitzvah of studying Torah is not a chok! It is a davar seechlee – a very rational commandment. Torah study is an intellectual pursuit. It seems quite incongruent that out of all the words to use to mean “you should toil in Torah study,” the Torah uses the word chukosai (my decrees). A far more appropriate wording would be “Im b’mitzvosai teleichu” or “Im b’mishpatai teleichua”, rather than “Bechukosai teleichu!”

The Beis HaLevi gives us a clue to answer this question in Parshas Mishpatim. When Klal Yisrael, said “na’aseh v’nishma” (we will do and we will listen), chazal say that they merited many spiritual rewards and acquisitions. The Beis HaLevi explains that when they said “na’aseh” (we will keep the Mitzvos), that obviously included learning Torah because it is necessary to learn what is in the Torah in order to know what to do. We can’t keep Shabbos unless we learn Hilchos Shabbos. We can’t put on Tefillin unless we learn Hilchos Tefillin. Thus, included in the “na’aseh” is learning Torah. We need to know what to do. Why then do we need “nishma”? It can’t be that we need “nishma” because we need to know what to do. We already know that based on “na’aseh.” “Nishma” means we want to learn more, even though we already know what to do.

When someone knows how to drive, he no longer needs to read the driving manual. Our cell phones come with detailed manuals. Once we learn how to use a phone or any other appliance, do we ever look at the manual again? What kind of endeavor is it that a person knows what to do, has been doing it for his entire life and he is still learning it? That is the “chok” of limud haTorah. I learn for no other reason than learning’s sake. Learning itself has incredible value.

Do you think that Rav Chaim Kanievsky needed to review Hilchos Shabbos or Hilchos Tefillin? He knew it by heart! So why did he need to finish the entire Torah every single year? It is because we are supposed to learn even if we already know what we are supposed to do. This is the “decree” of Im b’chukosai teleichu.

The sefer Avir Yakov presents the following mashal (parable): Someone is taking a walk and sees his friend drive by. The friend pulls over and shouts out the window “Can I give you a ride? I am headed in your direction anyway.” The pedestrian responds, “No. I am walking because I am supposed to walk. I have no specific need to reach a particular destination. I merely walk upon my doctor’s orders – cardio, weight-loss, all the good things in life!” This is the equivalent of “Im b’chukosai teleichu – she’tee’he’yu ameillim b’Torah” We do not study merely for the knowledge. We study because this is what the Almighty orders us to do.

When I first came to Ner Israel High School, more than fifty years ago, not knowing any better, I figured I would walk into the Rosh Yeshiva – Rav Ruderman’s office and give him a ‘shalom aleichem’. I came into the office wearing my cap. The Rosh Yeshiva looked at me and must have wondered, “What does this kid want?”

This memory that sticks in my mind until this very day includes being struck by what the Rosh Yeshiva was doing. The yeshiva was learning Gittin that zman. The Rosh Yeshiva was sitting there shuckling over his Gemara, learning Gittin daf daled. Do you think Rav Ruderman, zt"l, needed to review Gittin daf daled? How many times had he learned Maseches Gittin? How many times had he said shiurim on Maseches Gittin? So why was he learning Maseches Gittin? "Im b'chukosai teleichu."

That is one pshat why Torah study is referred to as a chok. The other pshat that I would like to share is from Rav Simcha Zissel Brody, who explained that it is because of the "magic-like" power of Torah. Torah study can change people. There is no other endeavor like it. Studying chemistry or mathematics, etc. does not change a person, but Torah does. That is "Im b'chukosai teleichu" – the inexplicable facet of Torah's ability to transform people.

I recently spoke in Lakewood at a siyum on Seder Nashim. A couple of months prior I was at an event where I found myself sitting next to a self-described "Modern Orthodox" Jew. We were sitting at this dinner and we started schmoozing with one another. He told me about his experience with Daf Yomi. He described the incredible impact it made on him. Knowing that I had to speak in Lakewood, I again got in touch with him and asked if he would write-up for me what he had told me that night at the dinner. This is what he sent to me and this is what I said in Lakewood. I believe it is a succinct summary of the power of "Im b'chukosai teleichu."

As I was moving into my thirties, I found myself floating through life, being less serious about and less connected than I should be to my Yiddishkeit. While I was certainly a regular 'shul goer' on Shabbos, it had been years since I had made any regular effort to attend minyan during the week. Other than occasionally learning with one of my sons to study for a test that he was having in school, I had not opened up a sefer in years. Basically, I had become an Orthodox Jew who was feeling pretty disconnected from meaningful Yiddishkeit and from Hashem.

Then I went to the Siyum HaShas in Met-Life Stadium several years ago. I decided to start Daf Yomi study – learning on my own. I went through Maseches Brochos and then Maseches Shabbos got tough for me. I was getting less committed to it and then Maseches Eruvin was a knock-out punch. I stopped learning Daf Yomi.

A while later I met my uncle, who convinced me that the only way to study Daf Yomi was in the context of a Daf Yomi shiur. "If you rely on doing it yourself, it isn't going to happen!" So I decided I would go to a 5:30 am Daf Yomi shiur.

I resumed Daf Yomi by Eruvin 50a. Daf Yomi literally changed my life for the better in so many ways. Before long, I started making an effort to daven Mincha and Maariv every day. I soon found myself in the local sefarim store holding a copy of the Ramchal's Derech Hashem. I was inclined to give it a shot some 25 years after I last touched it. I was blown away by that sefer and couldn't put it down. One thing led to another and I started to grow in my Yiddishkeit and started to feel a more serious and meaningful kesher with Hashem. For me, it all started with Daf Yomi – the concept that every single day, regardless of whatever daily challenges and frustrations come my way, I could set everything else aside and find menuchas hanefesh in the Gemara. It is an amazing thing.

That is what Rav Simcha Zissel means when he speaks about the treasured dimension of Torah study to expand and elevate the soul of those who engage in it. Torah has this magical ability to transform a person. That is what the fellow wrote: "It changed my life!" A fellow who hadn't picked up a sefer in years, now cannot put the Derech Hashem down!

Do you appreciate what he is saying? The Derech Hashem is not one of the easiest seforim to study. Daf Yomi not only changed his life, it changed his wife's life and the lives of his children as well. That is the chok of Torah – the power to expand and elevate all those who diligently study it.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi

Yisrochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion.

A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Behar/Bechukotai is provided below:

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from: **Michal Horowitz** <contact@michalhorowitz.com>

date: May 30, 2024, 11:00 AM

subject: **Bechukosai 5784: The Klalos and Jewish Destiny**

With this week's parsha, Parsha Bechukosai, we close the book of Vayikra once again. Bechukosai is a short parsha which deals with two main topics: the klalos (curses) that will befall Israel in exile (Vayikra 26), and arachin (valuations), when one dedicates the value of a certain item to the Beit haMikdash (Vayikra 27).

The parsha begins with a series of eleven pasukim that delineate the brachos (blessings) that will be showered upon Israel when the nation goes in the way of Hashem, keeps the mitzvos, and toils in Torah. These blessings include: the rain will fall in its time, the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will give forth fruit; the nation will eat to satiation and dwell securely in the land; there will be peace in the land and wild animals will cease from the land, and no sword will even pass through the land; the nation will chase its enemies and they will fall by sword; we will be fruitful and many, and Hashem will walk amongst us and be for us a G-d, and we will be His nation, and He will lead us with upright, strong and proud stature (Vayikra 26:3-13).

And then, the Torah warns us that if the nation does not go in the ways of Hashem, terrible disasters will befall us (Vayikra 26:14-46). The disasters are many, and they are painful. Our cities and land will lay desolate, we will fall before our enemies, we will be pushed into the cities where plague will break out, there will not be sufficient food, the land will not yield its produce, our enemies will eat what we sow and grow, there will be panic, fever, and wasting away, we will flee before our enemies and even run from the sound of a rustling leaf, parents will consume the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters they will consume, G-d will not accept our offerings and our temple will be destroyed and laid waste, we will be scattered amongst the nations of the world and the sword will follow us, we will be lost amongst the nations and we will have no upright bearing in the lands of our enemies... and so on, and so forth.

These verses are amongst the most painful in the Torah (along with the klalos of Ki Savo, found in Sefer Devarim). Anyone aware of any epoch in Jewish history recognizes the klalos that have befallen us time and again. It is difficult for us to understand and comprehend, with our limited, mortal, finite vision, how such events can happen. There is no answer to how or why the exile is so long, so bitter, so painful and so dark. Hashem is Ha'tov Vi'ha'meitiv - the One Who is good and does good; yet in this world, the good is sometimes difficult to discern. We do not say it does not exist, for Hashem created the world only to do good to His creations; but at times, it is hidden from our eyes.

While it is true that the Torah tells us the klalos will befall us when we reject the mitzvos and do not go in the ways of Hashem, Eichah tells us that the prophet, the nation, and our city of Yerushalayim cry out to the Heavens and weep and declare: וְכִי אִם-מִצְוֹת מְאֻסִּים מְאֻסִּים עָלֵינוּ עָד-מִאָּד (Eichah 5:22).

In regard to Oct. 7, Gitty Beer, one of the United Hatzalah members who raced to the South on that date (at great and very real danger to their own lives, and who continued to work in the south in the days following Oct. 7) relates: "Near the entrance to Kfar Aza there is a gas station. Inside there is a convenience store whose shelves had been emptied by soldiers who took

whatever there was on the shelves and left notes with their contact information so that they could pay the owners at a later date.

“When we pulled into the gas station on Tuesday afternoon (three days after the massacre), I saw an old man sitting near one of the outside tables and eating a yogurt. By this time, it was rare to see civilians in the area, and he was so out of place that he caught my eye. His clothing was shabby and tattered, and he had a very neglected appearance about him. He seemed to be about 80 years old.

“I approached him and asked gently, ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘I got hungry so I came to look for food,’ he replied. ‘Where did you come from?’ ‘I was in the safe room in my house in Kfar Aza.’ I was shocked. ‘But there is no one here anymore! Everyone was already taken from Kfar Aza!’ ‘I don’t know anything about that,’ he replied. ‘My wife and I came outside, and we didn’t see anyone, but I was hungry, so I went to look for food.’

“When I heard the old man’s words, my heart broke. The world had just come to an end in their village, and suddenly, these two old people just appeared out of nowhere, roaming around, with no idea of what had occurred. It was mind-boggling. I took the couple to an ambulance and gave them something to eat and drink, and we sent them to the hospital, where they would meet with a social worker who would take charge of their case” (Angels in Orange, The Shaar Press, p.116-117).

The pasuk tells us: וְכָשָׁלוּ אִישׁ-בְּאָחִיו כַּמְּפַיֵּי־חֶרֶב וְרָחַץ אֶזְרוֹ וְלֹא־תִהְיֶה לָּכֶם תְּקוּמָה לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: Each man will trip over his brother, as if fleeing from the sword, but without anyone chasing after you; you will not be able to stand up against your enemies (Vayikra 26:37). On the words: every man will trip over his brother, Rashi, quoting the Sages, teaches: Each man will stumble because of the sins of his brother, וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֵבִין זֶה לָזֶה, for all of Israel are guarantors and are responsible for one another (ibid).

The fate of one Jew is the fate of another, and the destiny of our nation is the destiny of us all. Lest any one person think he can escape the story of Am Yisrael, the Torah tells us otherwise: you are all responsible for one another. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l, the Rav, teaches: “Our fate does not distinguish between aristocrats and common folk, between rich and poor, between a prince garbed in royal purple and a pauper begging from door to door, between a pietist and an assimilationist. Even though we speak a plethora of languages, even though we are inhabitants of different lands, even though we look different - one may be short and dark, the other tall and blond - even though we live in varying and unequal social and economic conditions - one may dwell in a magnificent palace and the other in a miserable hovel - we still share the same fate. If the Jew in the hovel is beaten, then the security of the Jew in the palace is endangered. ‘Do not imagine that you can escape to the king’s palace from the fate of all the Jews.’ (Esther 4:13). Both Queen Esther, garbed in royal apparel, and Mordechai the Jew, clad in sackcloth, were caught in the same web of historical circumstances. ‘Chaverim kol Yisrael, All Israel are knit together’ - we will all be pursued unto death or we will all be redeemed with an eternal salvation” (Megillat Esther Masoret HaRav, p.87).

In the aftermath of Oct. 7 and the terrifying and terrible events that have occurred in the eight months since, we can only daven that the verses of nechama (comfort) in our parsha shall come to fruition immediately and in our days.

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי יְעֻקֹּב וְאֶף אֶת־בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶף אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֲזָכָר וְהָאָרֶץ אֲזָכָר- and I will remember the covenant of Yaakov, and also the covenant of Yitzchak, and also the covenant of Avraham I will remember, and the Land I will remember (Vayikra 26:42).

May the mercy of HKB”H be aroused (Tehillim 79:8), may our enemies fall before us and not vice versa (Vayikra 26:7-8), may the groan of the captives come before Him (Tehillim 79:11), and may HKB”H remember us while we are in the land of our enemies, never utterly rejecting us to annul the eternal covenant of Am Yisrael with our Merciful Father in heaven (Vayikra 26:44).

May we learn the lesson of collective responsibility (quoted above) and recognize finally that we have sufficient enemies without; and only our brothers are our friends within.

When we return unto each other with ahava and achva (love and brotherhood), and return unto Hashem with passion, love and desire for His Torah and mitzvos, perhaps then the geula will come and we will merit the promise of: וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאָרְצְךָ וְשָׁכַבְתָּם וְאֵין מִתְרִיד, and I will put peace in the land, and you will lay down and fear no one (Vayikra 26:6). For as Rashi comments on this verse: וְאֵין שְׁלוֹם אֵין כְּלוּם, if there is no peace, there is nothing. . . מִכָּאן שֶׁהַשְּׁלוֹם שָׁקוּל כְּגֹדֶל הַכָּל, from here we learn that the blessing of peace equals all other blessings (ibid).

תַּאֲגִיף לְגִזְחַת תִּבְעֵר כְּמוֹ־אֵשׁ קִנְאָתְךָ עַד־מָה הָהָה? Until when, Hashem, will Your wrath burn forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire? (Tehillim 79:5);

אֶלֶיךָ וְנָשׁוּבָה תַּעֲשֶׂה גְמִינוּ בְּקֶדֶם ה' הַשִּׁבֵנוּ הָהָה return to us, Hashem, and we will return to You, restore our days as of old (Eichah 5:21).

בִּבְרַחַת בְּשׁוּרֹת טוֹבוֹת וּשְׁבַת שְׁלוֹם

From: Alan Fisher <afisherads@yahoo.com>
 Alan Fisher <afisherads@yahoo.com>
 date: May 30, 2024, 10:42 PM
 subject: Shabbat Shalom: Potomac Torah Study Center Devrei Torah for Shabbat Bechukotai 5784
 BS”D May 31, 2024 Potomac Torah Study Center

Hamas continues to manipulate the media while pretending to negotiate with Israel. Hersh Polin Goldberg, cousin of very close friends of ours, remains a captive. We continue our prayers for the hostages and all our people stuck in Gaza. Israel is being roundly condemned for causing a fire at a humanitarian tent camp in Rafah, despite the fact that intelligence indicates it was the fault of Hamas. For more information, see <https://mail.yahoo.com/d/folders/1/messages/ABuU1xg-JoTzLiKAWh70IO8PXo>

May our people in Israel wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully – with the continued help of Hashem.

When one considers Bechukotai, thoughts obviously focus on the Tochacha, the lengthy section of blessings and horrible curses that dominates this final parsha of Vayikra. As usual, Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander’s Dvar Torah brings a profound message for current challenges facing our people. After the Tochacha, the Torah turns to the Arachin, mitzvot of how to value a person or animal that someone vows to donate to the Beit HaMikdash. Rabbi Brander observes that after the awful curses of the Tochacha, an obvious reaction is to question whether anyone living through such an experience would consider himself to have any value to God. Rabbi Brander observes, following the Kotzer Rebbe, that the Torah turns to the Arachin as a tikun for the Tochacha, to lift the spirits of our people who have just gone through horrible disasters. The Torah teaches how to value people, thus demonstrating that Hashem values every human, whether during good times or bad. The Torah states that every human has value, and we must cherish every human life. We need to absorb this message, especially during the dark period since October 7, when we have lost many Jewish lives to Hamas, the kidnapping and hostages, and even to the people of Gaza who have suffered and died.

As an economist, the real cost of any action is opportunity cost – what could have been in lieu of the unfortunate action. For each Israeli killed, the opportunity cost is what that person could have been plus the personal losses of each person important to the deceased victim. For hostages, the opportunity cost includes the value of the time the hostage lost as well as the cost of returning the person to full physical and mental health.

The opportunity cost of the Arab/Israeli conflict includes the seventy-five years during which the Arabs have refused to live in peace with Jews. During much of the period of Christian persecution of Jews in Europe, the Arabs permitted Jews to live and work in peace in their lands. These periods were times when Arabs flourished in culture and science. Since 1948, with Arab countries focusing on destroying Israel, Jews have been flourishing in science, medicine, and literature, but Arabs seem to have little value added to these fields. If Arabs, including the PLO, Hamas, and other terrorist groups, had instead focused on improving the world, who knows how much they might have contributed. Here is a summary from Wikipedia:

Of the 965 individual recipients of the Nobel Prize and the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences between 1901 and 2023, at least 214 have been Jews or people with at least one Jewish parent, representing 22% of all recipients.

Jews represent approximately 0.2 percent of the world population – and up to 22 percent of Nobel Prize winners. Where are the Arabs in this counting? The opportunity cost of hating Jews is stunning.

The campaign of the more than a hundred million Arabs in the Middle East compounds the opportunity cost of the Arab war against Israel. Since 1948, the other Arab countries have rarely permitted any “Palestinians” to immigrate into their countries. These countries appear to want to keep descendants of Arab citizens in Israel from 1948 in refugee camps surrounding Israel. If other Moslem countries in the Middle East had permitted families who fled Israel to become citizens of their countries, many of them might have become productive adults and contributed to tikkun olam. When Israel turned over Gaza to the Arabs in 2006, they left the modern Israeli equipment and agriculture that had made the land productive. The Arabs destroyed all the Israeli improvements and turned Gaza into a desert refuge for hatred.

Rabbi Brander’s focus on the lessons of Arachin is only a beginning of the disaster of Middle Eastern politics for the people of the region – and for the world. Hashem gave humans free will and the opportunity to work to improve the world or make it worse. The lessons of the past nearly eight months is the beginning of the cost of Arab hatred of Jews. My discussion extends the analysis to include the huge costs that go beyond these eight months. Including the costs of the explosion of anti-Semitism throughout the world makes the opportunity cost too great for me to explore. Despite the horrors facing Jews throughout the world, we still have a mandate to do all we can to make the world a better place. One necessary condition is to work on our personal mitzvot, including our personal relationships with Hashem. We must also teach these lessons to our children and grandchildren. Our relationships with others should include evaluating their attitudes toward Jews and Israel. Making the world a better place includes making Israel safe and fighting anti-Semitism in schools, universities, and all levels of government – both in our country and abroad. Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

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from: Ohr Torah Stone <ohrtorahstone@otsny.org>

subject: Rabbi Riskin on the Weekly Torah Portion

Parshat Bechukotai: A Vision of Transformation

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

“And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will cause evil beasts to cease from the land; neither shall the sword go through your land.” (Leviticus 26:6)

What kind of world will exist “at the end of the days,” the period of the Messiah and human redemption? Will the basic structure of the universe, the rhythm of our lives remain exactly the same – the sixty minutes to the hour, two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen – with the only major difference being the miracle of a vast multitude of different drummers recognizing the One God and His chosen orchestral leader (Israel)?

If so, this means that our present realities can be sanctified, ennobled – but need not be utterly destroyed. Or will the messianic age have to inaugurate an entirely new world, an indelible change in the nature of the universe, radically different physics and physical existence?

I would like to suggest that such not-only-theoretical speculation can be discerned as the preoccupation of the great sages of the Mishna, and their two alternate theological views give rise to two different translations of a word in this Torah reading.

The opening of Bechukotai sounds remarkably redolent of the messianic dream, the goal of human history. God promises the Israelites that if they but maintain His laws and commandments, their physical needs will be taken care of with good crops and good harvests, and the ever-present danger of wild animals will be removed:

“And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. I will cause evil beasts to cease (v’hishbati) from the land; neither shall the sword go through your land.” (Leviticus 26:6)

How are we to understand the concept: “cause to cease”? The Midrash (Torat Kohanim) records that Rabbi Yehuda defines v’hishbati as God causing these “evil beasts” to disappear from the world, that God will destroy them. However, Rabbi

Shimon interprets the word to mean that God will cause the evil of these beasts to cease: their evil nature will be destroyed, but the beasts themselves will not be destroyed.

Since this is not the only dispute recorded between these two sages, various commentaries have attempted to discern a more fundamental difference in their positions. For example, regarding the festival of Passover, our Bible commands: “Seven days [of Passover] shall you eat unleavened bread; but by the first day you shall have caused the leaven to cease to exist (tashbitu) from your homes.” (Exodus 12:15)

Clearly, the term for the “destruction” of leavening (chametz) is the same as the term for the “destruction” of wild beasts. And, true to form, we find the following difference of opinion in the Mishna:

“Rabbi Yehuda rules there is no destruction except with fire, but the sages rule [including Rabbi Shimon] that [the leavened substance] may be turned into crumbs and scattered to the wind or thrown into the sea.” (Pesachim 21a)

According to the Rogachover Rebbe, their debate is primarily semantic: in terms of how to define the verb sh-v-t, which may best be translated “to cease to exist.” Rabbi Shimon (as well as the majority of the sages) defines “tashbitu” as the destruction of the primary function: as long as the leavening is no longer edible or the wild beasts are no longer vicious, they can be considered to have been destroyed. Rabbi Yehuda, on the other hand, insists that destruction, or ceasing to exist, must include the substantive demolition of the object itself.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson of blessed memory, reveals another ideological difference of opinion between these two sages. He suggests that they consistently differ as to what is more significant, the external action or the internal intention. For example, if an individual desecrates the Sabbath without having intended to do so – imagine he was washing his hands without realizing that the faucet he had turned on was directly above his business competitor’s garden and he in fact was unintentionally causing the flowers to grow when he turned on the faucet – Rabbi Yehuda declares him culpable and Rabbi Shimon frees him from guilt. For the former it is the action that counts: a Jew ended up watering a garden on the Sabbath; for the latter it is the intention, and in our case in point he only intended to wash his hands. They similarly disagree about garbage removal from the house to the public domain on the Sabbath: Rabbi Shimon frees the individual from biblical culpability, since he did not intend to use the garbage – the object of his act of carrying from domain to domain – and he therefore was not engaged in a meaningful creative activity; his only intent was to remove the garbage from his home, and not to derive benefit from it in any way. Rabbi Yehuda declares him guilty nevertheless, because after all he committed the act of carrying, and halakha is not concerned about the reason for which he carried. The final example relates to the problem of oil left over in a lamp which had been lit before the start of a festival. Rabbi Yehuda forbids use of this oil because when it had initially been lit, the householder put it out of his mind for festival use, thereby rendering it muktzah, forbidden to be moved until the end of the festival day. Rabbi Shimon, however, permits it, because now that the light has gone out, the householder can use the oil in a manner permitted on the festival, and permissibility for him is only dependent on present intent. In this light, the initial differences of opinion between them assume a different perspective. For Rabbi Shimon, as long as I no longer intend to eat the leavening or as long as the animals have no intent to damage, these objects in effect ceased to exist; for Rabbi Yehuda the act of destruction is the only way for the objects to cease to exist.

Building on the Lubavitcher Rebbe, I would like to place a slightly different spin on the disputes we have just catalogued from a more theological point of view. How does Judaism deal with the problem of evil in the world? Is evil an objective force which must be destroyed, or can even evil be uplifted and redeemed, if only we perceive the positive essence of every aspect of creation and utilize it for good? Rabbi Shimon truly believes that the ultimate task of the individual is to sanctify everything; he in effect cancels the concept of muktzah (set aside, not for Sabbath or festival use) from the religio-legal lexicon, maintaining that virtually everything can be brought within the domain of the sacred if the human mind only wishes to use it for such a purpose. Rabbi Shimon is after all the great mystic of Jewish tradition, the teacher of the Zohar, the advocate of uniting all worlds and uplifting even the most far-flung sparks; “there is no object devoid of holiness,” teaches Jewish mysticism.

On the other hand, Rabbi Yehuda is not so optimistic and does recognize the existence of evil. Hence, he emphasizes the biblical command “and you shall burn out the evil from their midst” (Deut. 17:7).

The period between Passover and Shavuot is the progressive count of days between the physical and incomplete redemption of the broken matza and our advancement after 49 days to the spiritual, all-embracing redemption of the Torah we received at Sinai. The hametz (leavening) is the symbol of that which swells and expands, of raw emotions and physical instincts; it is made to “cease to exist” by destruction on Passover.

On Shavuot, however, it will be sanctified, transformed into two holy loaves of challa (chametz) brought on the altar to God. What was forbidden (evil) seven weeks ago has

now been redeemed. If anything, Shavuot is a manifestation of the redemption of evil, of our vision of the possibility of dedicating every aspect of our existence to God. Rabbi Yehuda insisted on destroying the chametz on Passover, obliterating it from the world; Rabbi Shimon understood that it would only be necessary to re-route its function, to look at it in a different way.

Rabbi Yehuda insists that the evil beasts will be destroyed in the messianic period, a time when all that is evil will be obliterated from the earth; Rabbi Shimon maintains that the fundamental nature of the world will not change, the wild animals will still roam the forests, but their evil will be transformed, their force and vigor will be utilized positively. Rabbi Yehuda sees the millennium as devoid of Amalek, the nation bent on the destruction of Israel; our Bible commands us to “destroy the memory of Amalek” (Deut. 25:19). Perhaps Rabbi Shimon would indeed see the millennium as being devoid of the memory of the ancient Amalek, for Amalek at that time will repent and join forces with Israel. Does our Talmud (Gittin 57b) not record that the grandchildren of Haman (the Aggagi Amalekite) taught Torah in Bnei Brak?! I pray for the vision of Rabbi Shimon.

Shabbat Shalom

Parshas Behukotai: The Condition of the Blessing

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BLESSING

The first half of Parashat B'hukotai is made up of the promise of Divine blessing (if the B'nei Yisra'el observes all of God's commandments, 26:3-13) and the threat of Divine disfavor and curse (if they fail to do so – vv. 14-45). Although a complete analysis of both parts of this text is beyond the scope of this forum, we will try to present an analysis of the nature of the blessing:

- * 3: If you walk in My statutes and observe My commandments and do them.
- * 4: I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.
- * 5: Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land.
- * 6: And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land.
- * 7: You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.
- * 8: Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.
- * 9: I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you.
- * 10: You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new.
- * 11: I will place My dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you.
- * 12: And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.
- * 13: I am Hashem your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.

Let's examine the opening line – the condition of the blessing:

If you walk in My statutes and observe My commandments and do them.

All of the consequent blessings are contingent on our fulfilling this brief directive. What is the meaning of this Divine command, fulfillment of which carries so many wonderful blessings, such as peace, prosperity and national holiness?

Before moving on, there is an anomaly in the structure of the blessing section which calls for our attention. Note the table below:

Verse – Promise

3 – The Condition

4 – Bountiful Crops

5 – Plenty and Security

6 – Peace in the Land

7-8 – Military Success

9 – Fertility and Recovenanting (see Rashi and S'forno ad loc.)

10 – Bountiful Crops (again!)

11 – God's Sanctuary in our Midst

12 – God's Presence in our Midst

13 – Concluding Sentence

As can be seen, v. 9 is a natural conclusion; however, there are another four verses in the blessing. So, the second question is what we are to make of these two blessing-sections. If it were not for v. 10, which returns to the theme of agricultural success, it would have been simple to identify the first section as financial, political and military success; the second could be tagged as spiritual excellence. The inclusion of v. 10, *va'Akhaltem Yashan Noshan, v'Yashan miP'nei Hadash Totzi'u* – (you shall eat old grain long stored and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new) makes this division untenable. Is there some other way to divide the blessings – or can we reorient our understanding of either v. 10 or v. 9 (the first “conclusion”) that will help our understanding of this section?

Our final question is more fundamental to the nature of the blessing: Aren't we taught that we should perform Mitzvot because we were so commanded – or because they represent the most noble “life-style”? Why does the Torah present this list of agricultural, political, military and spiritual “rewards” for doing that which we are otherwise obligated to do?

In order to address these questions, let's return to the first verse and the seeming redundancy. We will find two approaches among the Rishonim which, if taken together, will be the key to understanding this blessing.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITION

RASHI'S APPROACH: “AMELIM BATORAH”

Rashi, following the Torat Kohanim, addresses the seeming redundancy in the first verse: “If you walk in My statutes: I might think that this refers to fulfillment of Mitzvot; but when it says And observe My Mitzvot, observance of Mitzvot is already stated. If so, how do I understand If you walk in My statutes? that you should be laboriously engaged in Torah study. (*sheTih'yu 'Amelim baTorah*).”

In other words, Rashi understands the condition which we must fulfill as made up of two components: We have to observe the Mitzvot and we must also be ‘Amelim baTorah – laboring in Torah study.

S'FORNO'S APPROACH: “USH'MARTEM ZU MISHNAH”

R. Ovadia S'forno, bothered by the same redundancy, arrives at a similar conclusion – but from an opposite textual direction. He understands that “walking in My statutes” refers to the performance of Mitzvot – and that **Mitzvotai Tishmoru** refers to study. He bases this on the statement in the Sifri: *uSh'martem – zu Mishnah* (“observing” refers to learning). (Sifri R'eh #6)

In summary, Rashi and S'forno both understand that the blessings will only be fulfilled when and if the B'nei Yisra'el accomplish both performance of Mitzvot and Torah study. What, then, is their bone of contention – what underscores their different textual derivation?

III. ENGAGED ACTION

Both Rashi and S'forno are addressing the issue of cognitive awareness in the performance of Mitzvot. Rashi sees the mode of performance which will ensure these blessings as “intellectually engaged action”. Although a person may properly fulfill a Mitzvah while only being familiar with the operative details – e.g. how to hold the Lulav with the other three species, how much Tzedakah to give – someone who is intellectually engaged in the details, concepts and import of a particular Mitzvah will have a greatly enhanced experience when performing that Mitzvah. To that end, Rashi reads the first phrase of

the verse as referring to “laborious Torah study” – the hard work which goes into clarifying Halakhic concepts, analyzing various approaches and formulae etc. With that level of involvement, the performance which follows reflects a total involvement – i.e. loving God with all of the heart.

INTEGRATED ACTION

S’forno accentuates a different component of the cognitive perspective in Mitzvah-observance. He picks up the process where Rashi left off – with the performance of Mitzvot which is enhanced with intellectual involvement. S’forno raises the bar to a new level – not only must we come to the performance of Mitzvot armed with our own cognitive involvement; we must maintain that level of awareness while we are engaged in the performance. That is why S’forno emphasizes the “guarding = learning” equation – holding onto that which we have learned while performing, avoiding the all-too-common dichotomy of knowledge and action which, although consistent with each other, are often relegated to different times and settings.

Both of these Rishonim understand that in order for us to receive the blessings which follow, we must achieve a level of observance of Mitzvot which includes an investment of learning and attaching that intellection with the action implied therein. In order to understand this demand, let’s address the other two questions.

IV. YASHAN NOSHAN

As mentioned above, we were promised that we would have a bountiful harvest (vv. 4-5); the sequence from there on seems to spiral “upward”, to political security, military success and spiritual fulfillment. Why does the Torah “jump back” to the agricultural theme in v. 10? (You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new.)

If we look at the previous verse (the “first conclusion”, v. 9), we can see a subtle shift in the focus and nature of the blessing. Up until this point, we have been promised many blessings – and now God promises that He will turn to us and fulfill His covenant with us. Which covenant is meant here?

As Ibn Ezra points out, we might posit that the earlier part of the verse, the promise of fertility, is the “covenant” association – a fulfillment of the covenant with Avraham that we would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. There is, however, another critical component of the B’rit Avraham which may be the stress and shift here.

When Avraham was first commanded to go to the Land, God told him that he would be a source of blessing for all people. This promise was repeated at the Akedah – the concluding narrative of Avraham’s life. Along with the Land and numerous descendants, God promised that Avraham’s “all nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed” (B’resheet 22:18). In other words, all peoples would eventually come to know God and recognize His authority through the progeny of Avraham. This may be the covenant which God promises that He will establish with us in v. 9 – that we will be enabled to realize our goal and role as a “Light unto the nations”. The question is then raised: If we are indeed all together in our Land, living a blessed and righteous national life, how will the nations of the world “take notice” of us?

V. MAKING ROOM FOR THE GRAIN

The answer, counterintuitively, is to be found in the realm of commerce. Let’s take a fresh look at v. 10: You shall eat old grain long stored and you shall have to Totzi’u the old to make room for the new. The phrase Totzi’u can alternatively translated as “clear out”, as above; or as “export”, as S’forno renders it. As he explains, we will have so much grain that we will be able to safely export to other nations. By engaging in commerce with other nations them, two things will become readily apparent:

- 1) We have been generously blessed by our Creator – indicating Divine favor; and
- 2) Our behavior, specifically in the realm of interpersonal relations and business ethics, is of the highest standard.

Remember, this entire blessing is contingent on our integrating serious Torah study into our behavior. Certainly someone who studies Hoshen Mishpat (the section of Halakhah dealing with civil and criminal law) before getting involved in the world of commerce (Rashi) and who endeavors to internalize the sensitivities of that law into his business dealings (S’forno) will serve as an ethical beacon for others. Imagine an entire nation behaving like that!

We can now understand the continuum of the blessing. Subsequent to our own development as a strong and secure nation (see below), the Torah promises us that the covenant – of our being a blessing to the nations of the world – will be fulfilled WITH US. In other words, instead of this covenant being a B'rit Avot, which is operative even if we fail in our tasks, the covenant will be directly with us – in our own merit. That blessing will be enabled first by developing an association with other nations – through the commerce of exporting the goods of the Land.

VI. AND ONCE WE HAVE SUCCEEDED...

From this verse on, where we would reasonably have the concern that once we have drawn the nations of the world to us and they have rallied around the cry "Let us go up to the mountain of the House of God, that He will instruct us of His ways..."

Therefore, the next few verses promise us that our special relationship with God will not only be maintained – but that it will be intensified, hinting at a return to the intimate relationship enjoyed by Man and God in the Garden of Eden ("I will walk among you"; compare with B'resheet 3:8.)

This also explains why these "rewards" are necessary. In order for us to make our impression on the nations of the world, giving us the opportunity to teach, we must have our own stable, safe and economically sound nation. It is hard to develop a holy nation when the threat of war or hunger is constantly over our head; God's blessings insure that we can more easily fulfill our task and lead the world to a full awareness of the Creator and His moral guidance.

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PARSHAT BECHUKOTAI

THE CONCLUSION OF SEFER VAYIKRA

Considering that Sefer Vayikra is primarily a book of laws, it would certainly be appropriate to conclude those laws by explaining their reward - and that is exactly what we find in Parshat Bechukotai! Review Vayikra chapter 26 - better known as the '**tochacha**' - noting how it describes the reward (/or punishment) for keeping (/or defying) God's laws.

Hence, chapter 26 forms a fitting conclusion for the entire book. So why does Sefer Vayikra add one additional chapter (see chapter 27 /the laws of 'erchin') immediately afterward?

In this week's shiur we attempt to explain why.

INTRODUCTION

Let's begin by clarifying our opening question. Recall how Parshat Bechukotai (the last Parshat ha'shavua in Sefer Vayikra) contains two distinct sections:

- (1) the **tochacha** (chapter 26) -
 Bnei Yisrael's reward [and/or punishment] should they obey [/or disobey] God's commandments;
- (2) The laws of '**erchin**' (chapter 27) -
 A set of specific laws pertaining to the monetary evaluation of people or property dedicated to God.

Considering that Sefer Vayikra is a book that contains a collection of mitzvot, a '**tochacha**' would form an appropriate conclusion - for it outlines how God rewards (or punishes) Am Yisrael as a function of how they keep those mitzvot.

The first section of our shiur will explain how (and why) the **tochacha** should indeed be considered the conclusion of Sefer Vayikra. Afterward, we'll attempt to explain why the Torah may have 'added on' chapter 27 to form a significant 'epilogue'.

PART ONE - A PERFECT FINALE

Recall our explanation of how Sefer Vayikra divides into two distinct sections:

- A) **Kedushat mishkan** - chapters 1 -> 17.
 focusing on laws pertaining to the mishkan, such as korbanot, tum'a & tahara, etc.
- B) **Kedushat ha-am ve-haaretz** - chapters 18 -> 25.
 focusing on a wide range of laws of 'kedusha' outside the mishkan, to make Am Yisrael an '**am kadosh**'.

As you review both the 'positive' and 'negative' sides of the **tochacha**, note how the reward and punishment relates to **both** these sections, i.e. the mishkan and the Land:

* On the positive side, should Bnei Yisrael **obey** the mitzvot, then:

- B) "and I will put My **mishkan** in your midst..." (26:11)
- A) "and the **land** shall give its produce..." (26:4).

* On the negative side, should Bnei Yisrael **disobey** these laws, then:

- A) "I will make your **mikdash** desolate..." (26:31)
- B) "the **land** will **not** give its produce..." (26:20,34-35).

This only strengthens our claim that the **tochacha** should have been the last chapter of Sefer Vayikra! However, the best 'proof' is found in its 'final' pasuk.

THE FINAL PASUK -

Let's take a look at the final pasuk of the **tochacha**, to show how it relates to both halves of Sefer Vayikra:

"These are the **chukim & mishpatim**, and the **torot** which

God had given between Him and Bnei Yisrael on Har Sinai to Moshe" (26:46).

Clearly, this pasuk forms a summary of more than just the **tochacha** itself. Let's explain why.

Note how this final pasuk mentions two categories of mitzvot that we are already familiar with:

- 1) **chukim & mishpatim**, and
- 2) **torot**.

This implies that whatever **unit** this pasuk does summarize - it includes both '**chukim & mishpatim**' **and** '**torot**' (that were given to Moshe on Har Sinai). Hence, this pasuk must summarize more than the **tochacha**, for the **tochacha** itself does not contain "chukim & mishpatim", nor "torot".

Aware of this problem, many commentators attempt to identify the wider unit that is summarized in this pasuk.

For example:

* Rashbam suggests that it summarizes both Parshiot Behar & Bechukotai, i.e. chapters 25 & 26. This is quite logical, for the laws of shmitta and yovel could be considered the "chukim & mishpatim". This also makes sense since both these chapters are included in the same 'dibbur' which began in 25:1.

However, Rashbam does not explain which laws in this unit fit under the category of torot.

Furthermore, recall our explanation in Parshat Tzav that a 'torah' implies a procedural type of law, e.g. 'torat ha-chatat' - how the kohen executes the chatat offering, etc. Within chapters 25 & 26, it is difficult to pinpoint any such 'procedural' law.

* Ibn Ezra claims that this pasuk summarizes not only Parshat Behar (i.e. Vayikra chapters 25 & 26), but also Parshat Mishpatim, i.e. **Sefer Shmot** chapters 21 - 23!

Ibn Ezra's interpretation is based on his understanding that the **tochacha** in Parshat Bechukotai is none other than the 'sefer ha-brit' mentioned in Shmot 24:7 [i.e. in the Torah's description of the ceremony at Ma'amad Har Sinai when Bnei Yisrael proclaimed 'na'aseh ve-nishma']. (See Ibn Ezra on Vayikra 25:1 and Shmot 24:7.)

However, it seems rather strange to find a summary pasuk for Parshat Mishpatim at the end of Sefer Vayikra!

* Ramban agrees with Ibn Ezra that this pasuk forms a summary of the mitzvot in Parshat Mishpatim as well. However, he reaches this conclusion from a different angle. Ramban claims that this parshia of the **tochacha** was actually given to Moshe Rabbeinu during his second set of forty days on Har Sinai, and serves as a 'replacement' covenant - to replace the conditions of the original na'aseh ve-nishma covenant (as described in Shmot 24:7). As such, this summary pasuk summarizes the mitzvot in Parshat Mishpatim as well. [See Ramban on 25:1, towards the end of his lengthy peirush to that pasuk. This complicated (but important) Ramban is based on his approach to the chronological order of Chumash, but it is beyond the scope of this shiur.]

In any case, our above question regarding Ibn Ezra's approach would apply to Ramban's as well.

* Rashi offers the 'widest' understanding of this summary pasuk. He claims that this finale pasuk summarizes not only the entire 'written law' of the entire Chumash, but also the entire 'oral law' as well!

It is interesting to note that from among all of the commentators, only Rashi deals with the problem of determining the precise meaning of "torot". Rashi solves the problem by quoting the Midrash that it refers to 'Torah she-bikhtav u-ba'al peh'. However, this interpretation is quite difficult for (according to simple pshat) the word 'eileh' [these] at the beginning of 26:46 summarizes what has been **written** thus far, and not what has not been written yet.

* Seforno follows a direction similar to Rashi, but appears to

be a bit more 'realistic'. He claims that this pasuk summarizes **all** of the mitzvot that were mentioned in Chumash thus far, i.e. **before** Parshat Bechukotai. However, Seforno is not very precise concerning exactly which mitzvot are summarized by this pasuk.

In our shiur, we will follow Seforno's 'lead' and show how this final pasuk may actually form a summary pasuk for all of the mitzvot found in Sefer Vayikra! Our approach will be based on identifying more specifically what the phrases **chukim** & **mishpatim** and **torot** (in 26:46) may be referring to.

A FITTING FINALE

Recall once again how Sefer Vayikra divides into two sections (see above), and how the second half of the Sefer begins in chapter 18 with a set of five psukim that form an introduction. [See 18:1-5 and our shiur on Parshat Acharei Mot.]

As you review those psukim, note how these psukim actually introduce an entire set of **chukim** u-**mishpatim**. For example:

"Observe My **mishpatim** and keep My **chukim** to follow them, I am the Lord your God. Keep My **chukim** & **mishpatim**..." (18:4-5. See also 18:26-30!).

Therefore, the phrase **chukim** ve-**mishpatim** in our 'finale pasuk' (26:46) could be understood as the summary of the **second** half of Sefer Vayikra (chapters 18->25), as it refers to the numerous **chukim** u-**mishpatim** that are recorded in that section.

Furthermore, note how often we have found this phrase in the second half of Vayikra: see 19:19 & 37, 20:8 & 22, and 25:18!

In a similar manner, the word **torot** could be considered a summary of the laws found in the **first** half of the Sefer. Recall how the word **torah** was used numerous times to describe the various procedures regarding **korbanot**. The most obvious example would be Parshat Tzav where the phrase '**zot torat**...' introduced each category of **korbanot** (see 6:2, 6:7, 6:18, 7:1, 7:11) and also formed its summary (see 7:37!).

However, this phrase was also found numerous times in Parshat Tazria/Metzora as well (see 12:7; 13:59; 14:2,32,45; and 15:32).

Furthermore, even though this phrase is not mentioned by the other mitzvot in this section, most of its laws are of a procedural nature and could easily fall under this category of **torot**. Certainly, the seven day 'milu'im' & 'yom ha-shmini' ceremonies (chapters 8 & 9) are procedures and hence could be understood as **torot**, as is the yearly 'avoda' of the kohen gadol on Yom Kippur (see chapter 16).

Hence, the word **torot** in 26:46 can be understood as a summary of the procedural laws found in the **first** half of Sefer Vayikra.

Thus, the final pasuk of the **tochacha** (26:46) becomes an almost 'perfect ending' for the entire sefer:

"These are the **chukim** & **mishpatim** [summarizes the second half - chapters 18 thru 25] and the **torot** [summarizes the first half - chapters 6 thru 17] which God had given between Him and Bnei Yisrael on Har Sinai to Moshe" (26:46).

The phrase **chukim** & **mishpatim** summarizes Part Two of Sefer Vayikra, while the word **torot** summarizes Part One!

THE TOCHACHA & SEFER SHMOT

Even though we have shown how this finale pasuk (26:46) forms a beautiful conclusion for Sefer Vayikra, it contains an additional phrase that explains why it could be considered a conclusion for the laws in **Sefer Shmot** as well. [If so, this would help us appreciate Ibn Ezra & Ramban's peirush as well, and the chiasitic structure discussed in our shiur on Parshat Behar.]

Let's take a closer look at this finale pasuk, noting the second half of the pasuk:

"These are the **chukim** u-**mishpatim**, and the **torot** which God had given - **beino u-vein Bnei Yisrael** - between Himself and Bnei Yisrael, on **Har Sinai** through Moshe" (26:46).

This special phrase: '**beino u-vein Bnei Yisrael**' may highlight the covenantal nature of the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra. To explain why, we need only quote a pasuk that we are all familiar with from 'shabbos davening' [our sabbath prayers]. Note how the Torah uses an almost identical phrase as it describes how Shabbat should be considered a '**brit**':

"Ve-shameru Bnei Yisrael et ha-shabbat... - to keep it as a day of rest for all generations - **brit olam** - an everlasting covenant - **beini u-vein Bnei Yisrael** - an eternal sign..." (see Shmot 31:16-17).

In fact, this very concept of **brit** is emphasized several times by the **tochacha** itself:

"... ve-hakimoti et **briti** itchem" (26:9)

"... lehafrechem et **briti**" (26:15)

"ve-zacharti et **briti** Yaakov ve-af et **briti** Yitzchak..." (26:42)

"ve-zacharti lahem **brit** rishonim asher hotzeiti..." (26:45).

If this interpretation is correct, then we have found an additional thematic connection between the laws of **kedusha** in Sefer Vayikra and the purpose of Matan Torah as described at **brit Har Sinai**. As we have explained, the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra function as a vehicle thru which the goal of **brit Sinai** - "ve-atem tiheyu li mamlechet kohanim ve-goy kadosh" - can be achieved. (See Shmot 19:4-6.)

[Once again, note how this thematic connection can also explain the chiasitic structure that connected the laws in Sefer Shmot & Sefer Vayikra, as explained in our shiur on Parshat Behar.]

Hence, the phrase '**beino u-vein Bnei Yisrael**' in this summary pasuk may emphasize how the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra strengthen the covenant between God and Bnei Yisrael, as forged at Har Sinai, where Am Yisrael took upon themselves to become God's special nation.

THE TOCHACHA & SEFER BREISHIT

Thus far, we have shown how the **tochacha** forms a fitting conclusion for Sefer Vayikra, and thematically relates back to covenant at Har Sinai as described in Sefer Shmot. One could suggest that it may contain a certain element that thematically returns us to Sefer Breishit as well.

Recall our explanation of how Gan Eden represented an ideal environment in which man was capable of developing a close relationship with God. In that environment, man's reward for obeying God was a prosperous life in Gan Eden; while his punishment for disobeying God's commandment was death - i.e. his banishment from Gan Eden.

The two sides of the **tochacha** describe a similar environment for Am Yisrael living in Eretz Yisrael. Should they keep God's laws, Am Yisrael can enjoy a prosperous and secure existence in their land.

For example, 'im be-chukotai teilechu...', i.e. should you follow God's laws, then 've-achaltem le-sova be-artzechem' -you will enjoy prosperity in your land (see 25:3-6). - This would be in contrast to man's punishment when he was expelled from Gan Eden with the curse of 'be-ze'at apcha tochal lechem' (see Breishit 3:17-19).

Recall as well how God was 'mithalech' in Gan Eden (see Br.3:8). Similarly, He will now 'mithalech' in Eretz Yisrael together with His Nation: 'v'e-ithalachti betochachem, ve-hayiti lachem l-Elokim, ve-atem tihiyu li le-am' (see Vayikra 25:12).

On the other hand, should Bnei Yisrael not follow God's laws ('ve-im lo tishme'u...'), they will be faced with a troubled existence, culminating with their expulsion from the land (26:33), parallel to man's banishment from Gan Eden. (This parallel between Gan Eden and Eretz Yisrael was already introduced at the beginning of the second half of Sefer Vayikra - see 18:24-30).

[In this manner, the Midrashim that identify Gan Eden as Eretz Yisrael relate to more than its geographical location; rather they underscore a major biblical theme.]

PARSHAT 'ERCHIN' - WHY HERE?

We return now to our original question. If the final pasuk of the **tochacha** forms such an appropriate ending for Sefer Vayikra, why does the Torah place 'parshat erchin' immediately afterward (instead of beforehand in Sefer Vayikra)? After all, the laws of erchin, especially those relating to **yovel** (see 27:16-25), would have fit nicely within Parshat Behar, together with the other laws relating to **yovel**. [See Ramban on 27:1]

Furthermore, the laws relating to the dedication of objects to the Temple treasury could have been included much earlier in Sefer Vayikra, possibly in Parshat Vayikra together with other laws concerning voluntary offerings.

The simplest explanation is that the Torah did not want to conclude the Sefer on a 'sour note', i.e. with the **tochacha**, preferring instead to conclude with something more positive.

[Sort of like a adding on a 'happy ending' by selecting a 'parshia' that could have been recorded earlier, and saving it for the conclusion.]

The Ibn Ezra offers an explanation based on 'sod', relating to the deeper meaning of 'bechor' and 'ma'aser' (see last Ibn Ezra in Vayikra).

Seforno differentiates between these mitzvot (in chapter 27) that are voluntary, and the mandatory mitzvot summarized in 26:46. Because those mitzvot constituted the essence of the **brit**, they were summarized separately. Once those mitzvot were completed in chapter 26, chapter 27 records the mitzvot of Har Sinai that were not part of that covenant. (See Seforno 26:46.)

One could suggest an alternative approach, by considering once again the overall structure of Sefer Vayikra.

Recall from our study of Parshat Vayikra that the first five chapters (i.e. the laws of 'korban yachid') were given to Moshe Rabbeinu from the ohel mo'ed (see 1:1), while the next two chapters (the torot of the korbanot in chapter 6-7) were given from Har Sinai (see 7:37-38). Furthermore, since the laws of Parshat Vayikra were given from the ohel mo'ed, they must have been given only **after** the **shechina** had returned to the mishkan on the **yom ha-shmini**, and hence after the story of the seven day 'milu'im' & "yom ha-shmini" - as recorded in Vayikra chapters 8-10.

Therefore, it appears as though the laws in Parshat Vayikra were placed intentionally at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra, even though they chronologically belong in the middle of the Sefer.

Thus, we conclude that even though both the opening and concluding units of Sefer Vayikra belong within the sefer, the Torah records them as a 'header' and 'footer' instead.

The following chart reviews this structure:

CHAPTERS	TOPIC
=====	=====
* HEADER	
1->5	the laws of korban yachid (mitzvot)
	I. TOROT of: [first section]
6->7	- how to bring korbanot
8->10	- how the milu'im were offered
11->15	- yoledet, metzora, zav, zava
16->17	- how to enter kodosh kodashim
	II. CHUKIM U-MISHPATIM [second section]
18->20	- kedushat ha-am
21->22	- kedushat kohanim
23->25	- kedushat zman u-makom
26	TOCHACHA (& summary pasuk/ 26:46)
* FOOTER	
27	the laws of erchin (mitzvot)

Now we must explain why specifically these two parshiot were chosen to serve as the 'book-ends' of Sefer Vayikra?

SPECIAL 'BOOKENDS'

Parshat Vayikra and the parshia of erchin share a common

theme. They both deal with an individual dedicating an object to 'hekdeshe'. Both also begin with cases where a person offers a voluntary gift (nedava): Parshat Vayikra begins with **ola & shlamim** while parshat erchin begins with the voluntary offering of the value of a person, animal, or field.

[Vayikra deals with korbanot actually offered on the mizbeiach (kodshei mizbeiach) while **erchin** deals with the value of objects which cannot be offered, their value is given instead to the 'general fund' of the Temple - 'kodshei bedek ha-bayit'.]

One could suggest that the Torah intentionally chose parshiot dealing with the offerings of an individual, primarily the voluntary offerings, to form the 'book-ends' of Sefer Vayikra for the following reason.

As we have seen, Sefer Vayikra focuses on the kedusha of the **mishkan** and of the **nation**. These lofty goals of the **Shchina** dwelling upon an entire nation can easily lead the individual to underestimate his own importance. Furthermore, the rigid detail of the mitzvot of Vayikra may lead one to believe that there is little room for self-initiated expression in his own relationship with God, as our covenantal obligations could be viewed as dry and technical.

To counter these possible misconceptions, the Torah may have placed these two parshiot at the opening and concluding sections of Sefer Vayikra - to stress these two important tenets of 'avodat Hashem'. Despite the centrality of the community, the individual cannot lose sight of the value and importance of his role as an integral part of the communal whole. Secondly, the rigidity of Halacha should not stifle personal expression. Rather, it should form the solid base from which the individual can develop an aspiring, dynamic, and personal relationship with God.

shabbat shalom
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. It should be noted that Abarbanel does raise this possibility that the final pasuk of the tochacha summarizes only chapter 26, and not larger unit. Note how this forces him to explain the phrases chukim u-mishpatim & torot in a very different manner.

B. WHEN WERE THE MITZVOT OF SEFER VAYIKRA GIVEN?

In our shiur, we explained that the torot mentioned in Parshat Tzav were given on Har Sinai. How about the torot in Tazria Metzora, or basically, how about the rest of the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra - were they given from the ohel mo'ed or earlier when Moshe was on Har Sinai? The psukim do not tell us.

Based on the above shiur, we can suggest that most **all** of the mitzvot in Vayikra were actually given on Har Sinai, but are recorded in Sefer Vayikra for simply thematic reasons (i.e. 'torat kohanim'). Surely, Parshat Tzav states explicitly that its torot were given to Moshe on Har Sinai (7:37-8).

Therefore one can also assume that **all** of the torot mentioned in the Sefer were given on Har Sinai. In fact, this can explain Shmot 24:12 which states that Moshe went up to Har Sinai to receive the **torah & mitzva** - one could suggest that the **mitzva** refers to the laws of the **mishkan** which Moshe is about to receive that are recorded in the remainder of Sefer Shmot (see Shmot 25:1-4!). If so, then **torah** may refer to the **torot** (that relate to the **mishkan**). However, most of these **torot** are recorded in Sefer Vayikra and not in Sefer Shmot.

[ha-**torah** may also refer to the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, but that is a topic for a different shiur. [note Devarim 1:5 and the word **torah** throughout that Sefer.]

In a similar manner one could understand that the chukim u-mishpatim recorded in Sefer Vayikra may also have been given to Moshe on Har Sinai. To support this, see Devarim 5:28 and its context, as well as Shmot 24:1-4.

Therefore the mention of Har Sinai in this final pasuk does not limit its interpretation to referring only to Behar/Bechukotai, rather strengthens its interpretation as a summary of the entire Sefer. It is also likely that certain other mitzvot that were given in reaction to events that occurred after 'hakamat ha-mishkan', i.e.

after Nadav and Avihu died etc.) may have been given from the **ohel mo'ed**, but there is no reason why we cannot understand that all the other mitzvot recorded in the sefer were first given to Moshe during his 40 days on Har Sinai. Except of course those mitzvot that were given directly to Aharon, which indicate that they were given from the ohel mo'ed, and the mitzvot that were given in response to a question that Moshe did not have the answer for.

C. A CHIASTIC STRUCTURE WITHIN SEFER VAYIKRA

In the above shiur, we have noted a connection between the opening and closing parshiot of Sefer Vayikra. This suggests a possibility of a chiasmic structure within Sefer Vayikra itself. See if you can find this structure, noting how chapters 18 and 20 'surround' chapter 19, the connection between chapter 21 and chapter 16 in relation to the kohen gadol, chapters 22 and 11-15 in relation to **tum'a & tahara**, chapters 9-10 to chapter 23 in relation to cycles of 7 & 8, chapter 24 and chapter 8 in relation to the keilim of the mishkan, and chapters 6-7 and chapters 25-26 in relations to mitzvot given at **Har Sinai** (see finale psukim of both sections), 've-akmal'!

D. THE VALUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

As we explained above, the "tochacha" in Parsha Bechukotei (chapter 26) would have been a most fitting conclusion for Sefer Vayikra. Nonetheless, Sefer Vayikra adds one additional chapter, detailing the laws of "erchin" - i.e. the 'monetary' assessment of various individuals - should their value be dedicated to God.

Even though these laws seem to be rather technical, from a certain perspective they do reflect the value of every individual. But what does that have to do with the conclusion of Sefer Vayikra? As Ramban points out (see middle of his commentary to 26:11), the "tochacha" describes 'reward and punishment' at the national level. In other words, it promises prosperity in relation to the land's agriculture, political stability, security, and military success (see 26:1-11). On the 'down side' - it describes primarily national calamities show Bnei Yisrael not keep God's laws. On the other hand, God does not promise every individual (in this world) reward for his good deeds, or punishment for his sins.

There may be some thematic logic behind this distinction. As Bnei Yisrael were chosen to be 'nation' that will represent God among the nations of the world, we are judged as a nation; and rewarded as a nation. If we are successful in making a 'Name for God' by keeping His mitzvot properly, God will not only 'dwell in midst' (see 26:11-12), He will also provide us with material reward - that enables the nation to continue 'the good job'. On the other hand, should we embarrass God by our poor behavior as His special nation, God promises to consistently punish us, to various levels, until we finally 'learn our lesson' (see 26:14-- or even without repentance, should our situation becomes too pitiful (see Devarim 32:36).

[To support this point, note the phrase "le'einei ha'goyim" - in the eyes of the nations -in the finale pasuk (see 26:45 in its context), emphasizing the connection between God's covenant with the people of Israel and their influence on the rest of mankind.]

This thematic conclusion, however accurate, can lead to a very dangerous conclusion. If God's primary interest with His people is at the national level, then maybe the fate of each individual may not so be important [ask the early leaders of communism (like Stalin), if you know your history].

One could suggest, that it may be specifically for this reason that Sefer Vayikra chose specifically the laws of "erchin" - reflecting the value of each individual - as its conclusion, to 'balance' this possible misunderstanding of the "tochacha". Surely, the primary focus of the Bible is on the existence of Am Yisrael as a nation, but to truly act as God's special nation - the importance of every individual must not be under-emphasized.

E. THE CONCLUSION OF VAYIKRA & SHAVUOT

As many commentators point out, the "tochacha" relates directly to the covenant between God and Bnei Yisrael at Har

Sinai. [Note the tell-tale phrase: "beini u'bein Bnei Yisrael b'Har Sinai" in its concluding pasuk (see 26:46); as well as the parallel pasuk at the conclusion of the "tochacha" in Devarim (see Devarim 28:69 - "milvad ha'brit asher karat item b'chorev"). See also Chizkuni on Shmot 24:7!]

Even though all the mitzvot of the Torah are important, it seems that certain mitzvot, i.e. mitzvot of Parshat Behar in Vayikra chapter 25, were singled out to be part of the 'official' covenant.

[Note that all the psukim from 25:1 thru 26:46 form a single unit, as they are introduced by the same dibur.]

One could offer a very 'zionistic' explanation for this, as the laws in chapter 25 deal the "kedusha" of the Land of Israel in regard to keeping the laws of "shemitta" & "yovel" (see 25:1-13). In other words, one of God's primary considerations of how God will (or will not) punish us, depends on how meticulously we keep the laws of the "shemitta" year. [Note as well 26:34.]

On the other hand, chapter 25 contains much more than the 'technical' laws of "shemitta". If you read that chapter carefully, you'll note how its primary topic is the consequences of the laws of "shemitta" - reflecting the Torah's desire that Bnei Yisrael fulfill every aspect of the laws of social justice.

For example, as soon as we mention the laws of Yovel, the Torah immediately reminds us not to use those laws as 'technical loophole' to make a tricky 'real-estate deal' (see 25:14-17!)

Then, the Torah explains why these laws are so important, as God reminds us that our purpose as a nation is to be humble servants of God, rather than a group of wealthy landlords exploiting poor serfs (see 25:23-24).

The clincher of this direction are in the following thirty some psukim (see 25:25-55), which describe our communal obligation to help our neighbors in financial distress, by lending them resources so they won't need to either sell their land or even themselves!

Thus, even though the first thirteen psukim seem to describe the technical laws of "shemitta" & "yovel", the remaining forty some psukim focus primarily on assuring social justice for the poor and needy. In fact, by quoting the Torah's brief reference to the laws of "shemitta" in Parshat Mishpatim, we find that the very purpose of these 'technical laws' is to ensure social justice:

"Six years thou shall sow thy land, and gather its produce, but the seventh year thou shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of thy people may eat..." (Shmot 23:10-11)

[Note as well how social justice was a primary theme in most of the laws of Parshat Mishpatim as well.]

To provide additional support, I'd like to suggest that the Torah's reminder to keep God's "chukim u'mishpatim" in 25:18 may not be referring to the laws of "shemitta" but rather to the laws of Vayikra chapters 18 & 19, for the simple reason that the opening psukim of chapter 18 introduce exactly what God's "chukim u'mishpatim" are all about (see related TSC shiur on Parshat Acharei Mot). For those who don't remember, the intro in Vayikra 18:1-5 leads us to the conclusion that God's "chukim u'mishpatim" are none other than the laws of Parshat "Kedoshim Tihyu" (i.e. Vayikra chapter 19!)

If these observations are correct, then the thrust of God's covenant with His people at Har Sinai, and especially His promise of reward (or punishment) should we keep (or not keep) His mitzvot, relates primarily to the ability of Bnei Yisrael to create a society characterized by acts of social justice ("tzedeq u'mishpat" - see Breishit 18:17-19!), thus setting an example for other nations to learn from (see Devarim 4:5-8).

Should we emphasize this direction, as we meticulously keep all of God's mitzvot, may we be worthy of God's promise of:

"And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid; and I will cause evil beasts to cease out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land. And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword... and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. And I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you; and will establish My covenant with you!" (see Vayikra 26:6-9)