

Bechukotai--By my decrees
Leviticus 26:3-27:34
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Introductory note

A surface reading of this portion begins with an untenable maxim, a classic "if, then" God pronouncement. A fundamentalist might find relief in the clear and absolute quality of the statements. If you are good, good things will happen, and if you are bad, it will be horrid. But, at least the covenant between God and His people will always be present.

Our contemplatives, our mystics, spend most of the time on this portion exploring a just a few of the few seminal ideas: what does it mean to "follow God's statutes, observe God's commandments, and perform them?" If we talk to Job, we will get a glimmer that trying to understand God's justice, in simple cause and effect terms, will simply come to frustration. So what do we do with these statements? Their departure point for finding spiritual meaning begins with the lack of comprehensibility of any rational notion of God's justice.

They go on to ask, how do we learn to walk erect, upright in the face of this awesome mystery? How to stand upright and not be weighted down by fear and lack of mature integration of humility?

And they respond to this statement: "Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My covenant with them...." [Lev. 26:44] Our rabbis respond to this statement in the poetry of earthly love.

Learning to be receptive to God's love, learning to know Divine presence, is a continual process of refinement. Let us continue our work together and take in words of Torah, let them saturate us.

Niggun

Rabbi:

**Barukh attah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher
kiddeshanu be'mitzvotav, ve'tzivanu la'asok be'divrei Torah.**

**Blessed art thou, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who
sanctifies us with Thy commandments and commanded us
to engross ourselves in the words of the Torah.**

I. "If you follow My statutes and observe my commandments and perform them," [Lev. 26:3]

"If you follow My laws" [Lev. 26:3]. RaSHI follows the Midrash in understanding this as making an effort at Torah study. To put effort into Torah means to follow His laws. This [includes] even one who does not understand, but still spends effort on study because he takes pleasure in contemplating God's word even without getting at the meaning of it. In fact, the Torah is 'hidden from the eyes of all the living' [Job 28:21], and one should study it even while recognizing that less than one part in a thousand of it can be grasped. A person who 'learns' this way partakes in the root of Torah.

Sefat Emet p. 209

"...once people have tasted the meanings of Torah, who would be fool enough to deny blessing God for that great joy and pleasure? But the point is that one blesses beforehand, before understanding, when one only desires to contemplate holy words, the words of the living God."

Sefat Emet p. 210

"Even though the sages taught that there is no reward in this world for fulfilling the commandments, that is true only rationally and from our human point of view. But in fact God has made the law of the entire universe depend upon Torah. Since it is taught that the world was created through Torah, the connection between world and Torah is higher than the rational mind [can reach]. But a person who transcends his own self, truly 'follow His laws,' is given sustenance by Torah in this world as well."

Sefat Emet p. 210

The Zohar and our hasidic teachers posit "a multilayered understanding of reality. For the one who rationalizes his religion, counting up the good deeds performed and seeking appropriate payment, there is indeed no reward to be had in this world. The reward is more subtle and cannot not be seen by such a mind. Who is the one who perceives this reward: The person who lives by faith, seeking always, even without understanding, to do nothing other than to 'follow His laws.' Such a person partakes of Torah at its root, where the deep connection between divine teaching and divine creation lies whole and unchallenged."

Art Green, p. 211

from the Zohar

"If you walk in my statutes"

"This is the place from which depend the decrees of the Law, whereas 'judgment' signifies another and higher place to which this statute is attached; and the two, 'statute' and 'judgment', are all connected both on the higher and the lower plane. All the commandments and decrees and sanctifications of the Torah are attached to these, because one is the Written Torah and the other the Oral Torah. Both are intertwined and form one entity, and this is the sum of the Holy Name, so that he who transgresses against the commandments of the law in effect impairs the Holy Name.

And you shall do (make) them. After 'walk' and 'keep', have been mentioned, why does it also says 'do'? because he who 'keeps' the precepts of the Law and 'walks' in God's ways, if one may say so, 'makes' Him who is above...because [the higher and the lower aspects] are both aroused through you and join together so that the Holy Name is consummated." Zohar, Soncino edition, p. 153

"Who is it that 'makes' the Holy Name every day? You must say, he that gives charity to the poor....He that gives charity to to the poor makes the Holy Name complete...Hence he who sets this activity in motion from below, as it were, fully makes the Holy Name...Why is this so? Because the poor man has not anything of his own, save what is given him, and the moon has no light save what is given her by the sun....Therefore, if one has pity on him and gives him charity, the tree of life rests upon him....This applies only to charity done for its own sake..." Zohar, Soncino edition, p 154

We must keep abundance flowing in order to unite our place of existence with the Divine. Giving charity to the poor, purely as a desire to fulfill the commandments, to do God's will, brings the Shekinah to life among us, unites the Holy Name.

"Each Jew has certain particular paths to walk. One who serves God, longing always to find those paths that are unique to him, will be led by God in a true way."

"This is the meaning of 'If you follow My laws': it is within a person's power to see the ways and patterns that God has inscribed into the human soul. The Midrash says that laws are called hukkim [lit.: 'inscriptions, engravings'] because they are carved within us to stand out against the evil urge. Just as a person may feel his soul drawn to the temptations of that urge, that soul even more clearly contains ways and paths that distinctly lead to God. These are imprinted or engraved upon the human soul. But to bring these to fulfillment requires divine help, [aroused by] human desire and struggle at Torah. "

Sefat Emet p. 211

"When something is written, the substance of the letters that express it--the ink--remains a separate entity from the substance upon which they have been set--the parchment. On the other hand, letters engraved in stone are forged in it. The words are stone and the stone is words.

By the same token, there is an aspect of Torah that is 'inked' on our soul: we understand it, our emotions are roused by it, it becomes our 'lifestyle' or even our 'personality', but it remains something additional to ourselves. But there is a dimension of Torah that is chok, engraved in our being. There is a dimension of Torah which expresses a bond with God that is of the very essence of the Jewish soul.

--Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi

A rabbi once offered the following analogy: "Every Jew is a letter in the Torah. But a letter may, at times, grow somewhat faded. It is our sacred duty to mend these faded letters and make God's Torah whole again

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchack of Lubavitch heard this, and objected: 'No, the identify of the Jew cannot be compared to erasable ink on parchment. Every Jew is indeed a letter in God's Torah, but a letter carved in stone. At times, the dust and dirt may accumulate and distort--or even completely conceal--the letter's true form; but underneath it all, the letter remains whole. We need only sweep away the surface grime, and the letter in all its perfection and beauty, will come to light."

--From the "Parshah in Depth, from the Chassidic Masters, the Chabad web site

We sit in silence to let the dust and dirt lift, to reveal the letter which is engraved on our soul.

So we can listen to words of Torah and let them move in mystery within us and among us.

Niggun silence

II. I am The Lord your God..."who made you walk erect" [Lev. 26:13]

David 'was proud that in every thought he considered all day long he would find some witness to God...there is no place and no thing where the power of the ten utterances and the Ten Commandments is not found. A Jew has to make this clear, to find the Torah-Light in every place.

All the events and thoughts that occur to a person are for this purpose, to make his witnessing more clear....

Just as the Sabbath is called a witness, in which the good of all the six weekdays is purified and uplifted, so are Israel called witnesses, purifying and raising up all the good from this mixture [in which we live]. That is why it says: 'You are my witnesses.'

Sefat Emet p 212-13

"your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing' [Lev. 26:5]. It is written: 'Light is sown for the righteous' [Ps 97:11]. This is the light of Torah that a person takes into his heart and it bears fruit. Then he has to purify his deeds, so that they be without anything rotten. If he purifies sufficiently, he will receive another dose of light, on onward forever. This is the meaning of [the verse:] "your threshing shall overtake the vintage.' this is the [on-going process of] purification.

Sefat Emet p. 214

"insight inspires you to the deed; deed become the locus of new insight."

Art Green, p. 214

"It is man's nature, when he wants to do something, he first imagines it, considering what benefit he will receive from the action, and then does it....The way of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not thus...With the Torah and the mitzvot that He commanded us to do, He commanded us to learn and do with all our hearts and souls, but not according to the measurement of the boundary of our intellect, to estimate the total goodness of the action. Rather, His will must be fulfilled without any preparation from the side of man, just to gaze before His presence and be drawn after His will. Then after, the Holy One, blessed be He, will show the man the depth of wisdom and good hidden within the action."

Living Waters, pp. 252-53

'[I am The Lord your God...] who made you walk erect' [Lev. 26:13]....Only in this world, because of its vanities, do we have to bend and be quite bowed over in order to have proper awe."

"This too is spoken of in the Midrash. Where it says: 'I will walk in your midst' the Midrash adds 'and you will not be shaken.' Might this mean that you will have no fear of God? No, because Scripture says: 'I am The Lord your God.' This means that they will be able to accept the yoke of God's rule just as they are, without having to transform or humble themselves excessively. This is the promise--that they will be able to walk erect."

Sefat Emet p. 214

"...after a man achieves the quality of Anavah, humility, then the previous understanding of Yirah will be understood at the blink of an eye, with no need of contemplating and investigation to achieve it, but it will be simple and clear to him. This is "If you walk in My statues, meaning that His statues will be carved into your hearts."

The Living Waters, p. 251

"...to the extent that they are carved in his heart and fixed there, then he may experience expansion, and go wherever his desire leads him, for God is with him."

The Living Waters pp. 251-2

When our practice is to come to know God's presence in all places and all things, then humility becomes an implicit and natural state, and we walk erect with God.

Niggun

Silence

III. "But despite all this, while they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them nor will I reject them to annihilate them, thereby breaking My covenant that is with them, for I am the Lord their God. [Lev 26:44]

I will remember for them the covenant [made with] the ancestors, whom I took out from the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be a God to them. I am the Lord. [Lev. 26:45]"

After the events of the Golden Calf:

From the Zohar--

"'Now Moses took the tent and pitched it without the camp' [Ex 23:7]. Why did he do so? Said Moses: Since Israel have denied the Holy One, blessed be He, and have exchanged His glory for another, let His pledge here be in the hands of a faithful keeper until we see with whom it will be left. He said to Joshua: Thou shalt be the man of trust between God and Israel, and the pledge shall be entrusted to thee, until we see with whom it shall be left. Why to Joshua? Because he stood to Moses in relation of the moon to the sun, and he was a fitting person to hold the pledge...Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moses: Moses, this is not right. I have given my pledge to them, and even though they have sinned against me, it must remain with them. Therefore return my pledge to them, and for its sake I will not abandon them wherever they are. Therefore wherever Israel go into exile the Shekinah is with them, and therefore it is written, 'And I will set my tabernacle among you.'"

"Happy...are Israel to whom it has been granted that this pledge should be with them from the supreme King, for though they are in exile, the Holy One, blessed be He, comes

at the beginning of every month and on every Sabbath and festival to take note of them and to look at his pledge which is with them, his most precious possession.”

“He still loves them, and when He yearns for them, He goes up on roofs and steps to gain a sight of them through the chinks of the wall, and as it says, “He looks in at the windows, he glances through the lattice, in the synagogues and houses of learning. Therefore Israel should rejoice on the day on which they know this and say, ‘This is the day on which The Lord has wrought, and we will rejoice and be glad in it.’ [Ps 68:24]

Zohar, Soncino ed, p157

“...but God will not reject Israel, because the beloved of His soul is among them, and for her sake all of them are beloved of Him. If a man loves a woman who lives in a street of tanners, is she were not there he would never go into it, but because she is there is seems to him like a street of spice makers where all the sweet scents of the world are to be found. So ‘even when they are in the land of their enemies’, which is the street of tanners, ‘I will not abhor or reject them’, because of that bride in their midst, the beloved of my soul who abides there.’

Zohar, Soncino ed., p. 160

Niggun

silence

bell

Resources:

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza, translated and edited by Betsalel Philip Edwards, Living Waters, 2001

Rabbi Yehyah Leib Alter of Ger, translated and interpreted by Arthur Green, The Language of Truth, 1998

Zohar, Vol. V, Soncino Press, 1984

Chabad website, “Parsha in Depth, from the Chassidic Masters, Bechukotai”