

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he 26th chapter of 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 G-d'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. G-d will make them free. "I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high."

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 will not listen to me and carry out all these commands ... I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it ... If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze ... I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings. I will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled ... As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing 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 G-d 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 civilizations. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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 G-d

<sup>1</sup> John Schaar, *Legitimacy and the Modern State*, 291.

<sup>2</sup> Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, ch. 5.

spelled out to individuals at the beginning of human history: Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (Gen. 4:6-7)

The choice – G-d 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 G-d – 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 G-d, 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 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:

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live. (Deut. 30: 19)

One of the most profound contribution Torah made to the civilization 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 G-d 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. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd 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 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! ©2022 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

## Wein Online

This week's Torah reading marks the end of the book of Vayikra. This, the third book of the Torah, is replete with laws, commandments, and descriptions of Temple services. It is also the book that contains the fundamental principles of human relationships, as envisioned by the Torah and Jewish tradition. It is a book about holiness, but not only about ritual holiness or Temple service, but also the holiness of human beings and human relationships.

The great principle of the Torah is included in this book -- to be able to love and treat another human being as one can love oneself and wish to be treated by other human beings. It is this balance between ritual practice and exalted social and psychological values that in many ways characterize the essence of Judaism and of traditional Jewish life. By combining these two facets of the commandments granted to us on Mount

Sinai, Judaism asserts its eternity, its service to our Creator and to the human beings that he created.

Though we often divide the commandments that appear in this book into two separate sections -- those that relate to God and those that relate to our fellow human beings -- in reality it is only in the totality of two taken together that one can see and experience the true nature of Judaism and Jewish life. Since both sections are equally commanded, so to speak, by the total, they are not to be viewed as two distinct sections of Jewish life, but, rather, as the two components that create the totality of Jewish life and our eternal existence.

With the exception of the story of the tragedy of the sons of Aaron, the entire book of Vayikra is free of narratives. This is unique, for the other four books of the Chumash contain a great deal of narrative. The commentators note this exception, and state that one of the reasons for this is to emphasize to all later Jewish generations that even though the narrative story of the Jews and of Judaism is vitally important, that story can never be communicated in a meaningful and eternal fashion, without the observance and study of the laws and commandments that form such a basic part of Jewish life.

The future of the Jewish world is determined by loyalty to tradition and observance of commandments. As important as knowledge of history is -- and I consider it to be very important -- history alone can never preserve us. There are many great schools in the world that teach and delve into the history of past civilizations and great empires. The studies may be fascinating and increase our sense of scholarship, but they do nothing to revive those civilizations and empires that have passed from the scene, never to return.

It is only through the actual enactment and discipline of commandments on a daily basis that we can be confident that the narrative of the Jewish people will continue and grow. It is in this knowledge that we are strengthened by this moment of completion of this holy book of the Chumash Vayikra. ©2022 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Yom Yerushalayim

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**E**ven though the entire Land of Israel was divided among the tribes, the city of Jerusalem is owned by all Jews and no one has a private stake in it. This applies to the land itself and not to the structures that are built on it. The buildings belong to whoever bought them.

The communal ownership of the land has certain interesting halachic ramifications. For example:

1. Since all who ascended to Jerusalem on the pilgrimage festivals (*regalim*) were partial owners of the land, they could not be charged rent for their stay in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it was in the interest of the locals to house the pilgrims, because they would benefit by receiving the skins of the sacrifices offered. Nowadays, though, no one can get out of paying for their stay in a hotel in Jerusalem. This is because in the meantime, non-Jews captured the land, and the Jews who later bought it are no longer obligated to subsidize the pilgrimages of the entire Jewish people.

2. Throughout the Land of Israel, one is not permitted to have a balcony that extends into the public domain. Rather, a person must limit his construction to his private property. However, in Jerusalem one is not permitted to build a balcony even on his own property, because the land belongs to everyone.

3. There is an additional special law pertaining to Jerusalem. Kilns are not allowed there (on account of the unsightly smoke). Actually, *halacha* does not allow a kiln within fifty cubits of any city in Israel. What is different about Jerusalem is that since no individual owns any part of it, no one would have been able to insist that his neighbor move his kiln outside the city limits if there weren't a special ordinance to that effect.

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#### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**G**ood people are rewarded, and evil people are punished. In the words of the Torah: "If you keep my commandments...then I will give your rains in their season...but if you will not listen to Me...I will bring terror over you" (Leviticus 26:3-4, 14-16).

Throughout the ages, this principle has raised difficulty. After all, we all know countless examples of good people who suffer and evil people who flourish. This is the philosophical question of *tzaddik v'ra lo* (a righteous person who suffers). Doesn't this reality run contrary to what the Torah states?

Yet another problematic issue is the directive "not to serve the Master for a reward, but to serve Him with no reward in mind" (Ethics of the Sages 1:3). This seems to contradict our text, which suggests that good deeds are performed for reward.

Let's consider a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Imagine that good people are always rewarded and evil people automatically punished. In such a world, freedom of choice would be nonexistent. If for every ten dollars one gave to charity, one received twenty dollars, everyone would give charity. Similarly, if every time one spoke slander, one's tongue cleaved to the palate, no one would speak wrongfully. Since freedom of choice is central to being human, it follows that in a world of exact reward and punishment, our

very humanity would be jeopardized.

But how can one explain this week's portion, which clearly speaks of reward for good deeds and punishment for misdeeds? Rabbi Ahron Soloveitchik suggests that the answer may lie in understanding that there are two types of reward and punishment: on an individual level and on a collective level.

On the individual level, the Talmud states, there is no reward for doing a mitzvah in this world; that comes in the hereafter (Kiddushin 39b). A promise of reward in the hereafter – requiring a significant leap of faith – will not compel individuals to act properly. Human choice thus remains intact.

In this world, however, reward and punishment does function on a collective level. When one does something positive, the larger community benefits. Similarly, when one does something negative, the community suffers. Note that when discussing reward and punishment, the text is in the plural. Similarly, in the second portion of the Shema recited morning and night, reward and punishment are in the plural (Deuteronomy 11:13-21). In fact, when reward is written in the singular, it refers to an individual's portion in the world to come. An example is "Honor your father and mother that your days may be long" (Exodus 20:12; Kiddushin 39b).

We have thus come full circle. The good can suffer in this world, as there is no exact reward and punishment for individuals. However, when doing the right thing, we may not benefit personally but the community does. In a world that emphasizes the primacy of the self, our portion tells us that it may be impossible to control our own destiny. But what we do reverberates for the larger community. ©2022 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd you will eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall you eat. (Vayikra 26:29) In the tochacha, the terrifying warning of what will happen if we don't listen to Hashem, we are told that people will sink to eating their children due to the extreme famine. This is the final step before Hashem will destroy the places of idolatry and eradicate our cities. This is horrifying indeed, but the Torah seems to be waxing poetic for no reason. Why separate the sons and daughters? Simply say, "You will eat the flesh of your children."

The Ohr HaChaim offers three suggestions for the doubled mention of eating, which shed much light on why this was the last straw. First of all, he says, even after eating the flesh of their sons, they will not feel remorse or regret as one normally would. They

would not be aroused to cry, "Alas, my son!" or "Woe, upon my daughter!" Instead, they'd be willingly looking for the next opportunity.

Then the Ohr Hachaim suggests that when they were planning to eat their children, they chose to eat the flesh of the sons first, because they could put up a fight or flee for their lives. (We see the curse was that they would actually butcher them for food.) They were less worried about the girls being able to protect themselves, so they left them to eat later.

Finally, he offers the possibility that the people had more mercy on their sons, as Chazal in the Sifri tell us is the case. They therefore calculatingly ate the flesh of their sons first, so it would be easier to eat the flesh of their daughters. Once the dearer sons were gone, eating the girls would be like eating regular food. Each explanation is worse than the one before.

The lesson of this catastrophe can be extrapolated to all sin. The Torah perhaps chose this act as the paradigm for it because it would be universally reviled. But let's look at the progression.

The Torah directs us to serve Hashem, but He created a powerful urge to sin, so that we might build our strength and earn reward by resisting it. However, if one sins, he should at least feel guilty afterwards. He knows right from wrong, but was motivated by his desires. The Jews of the Tochacha, however, are too far gone for that. They are so removed from Hashem that they feel no remorse for even the gravest of sins. And then it gets worse.

The next level is that of one who sins and does what he can to ensure he will be able to achieve his desires, and that they not be kept from him. He is now actively seeking sin. Finally, the sinner attempts to deaden himself to any sensation of conscience. He wants to make it easier to sin, and that is the last straw. At that point, we have left behind any service of Hashem and we serve foreign gods, in the form of serving ourselves.

The bright side in all this is that if, when we sin, we feel bad and don't want to repeat it, it's proof we have not severed the connection to Hashem and it's not too late to repair the relationship.

*In the Yom Kippur War, the Israelis surrounded the Egyptian 3rd Army, capturing thousands of soldiers. Afterwards, an Israeli soldier was chatting with the Egyptian POW he was guarding. The Egyptian asked the soldier: "You claim to have a Biblical right to the land of Israel. You put your life on the line to defend your right to live in it. But that is only one of many commandments your G-d gave you. Why is it that you like that one, if you have no use for the others?"*

*The soldier realized he had no answer. He began searching for his roots and became a fully observant Jew. The Arab prisoner's incisive question and the soldier's willingness to be honest with himself had made the Jew into a Baal Teshuva. ©2022 Rabbi J.*

Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## Understanding the Tochacha

**P**arashat Bechukotai is noted as the first of two sections of the Torah foretelling the destruction of the B'nei Yisrael and the Land of Israel should the people not follow the Laws of Hashem. It speaks of the famines which will destroy the crops, physical sufferings of the people, wars and exile. These punishments are not meant as revenge for turning away from Hashem, but as a means to encourage teshuvah, returning to Hashem. The Torah is clear that one should not withhold rebuke when it is necessary; but one does not rebuke to feel superior, but only to encourage the sinner to change his ways. The admonition delivered here is a realistic view of the future, but at the same time it is a warning that hopefully may cause the people to recognize in the future what the Torah says would happen and to understand that they must do teshuvah before the next set of punishments come.

Several patterns are formed within the tochacha. As noted, the progressive intensity of the admonition can be recognized by the divisions caused by these patterns. There are similar beginnings for each of these sections: (1) "But if you will not listen to me and will not perform all of these commandments (26:14)," (2) "If despite this you do not heed me (26:18)," (3) "If you behave casually with Me and refuse to heed Me (26:21)," (4) "If despite these you will not be chastised toward Me (26:23)," and (5) "If despite this you will not heed Me (26:27)." Each of the sections after the first warning also contains a phrase: "I will punish you further, seven ways for your sins." Rashi interprets each of the seven sins to shed light on our discussion: (1) abandons study, (2) stops performing mitzvot, (3) abhors those who perform mitzvot, (4) hates Torah scholars, (5) prevents others from performing mitzvot, (6) renounces mitzvot, and (7) renounces the essential aspect of Judaism, (Hashem and the Receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai). Rashi's interpretation places a greater emphasis on the individual's downfall while causing others to follow in his footsteps.

Rashi explains that the phrase concerning seven ways means that Hashem will strike the B'nei Yisrael with seven punishments for their sins. The Or HaChaim points to the beginning of this section which lists seven different sins which are outlined as the reason for the punishments. These seven punishments are then midah kneged midah, each punishment a direct response in kind to the sin. The Or HaChaim paraphrases the Torah to accent each of the sins: "(1) But if you will not listen to Me and (2) will not perform all

of these commandments, (3) if you consider My decrees loathsome, (4) and if your being rejects My ordinances, (5) so as not to perform all My commandments, (6) so that you annul My covenant (26:14-15)." While this pasuk only gives us six sins, the Or HaChaim explains that the seventh sin comes with the rejection of Hashem after each of the warnings, which causes Hashem at each section to close the Gates of Heaven to the cries of the B'nei Yisrael.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains the process of deterioration which causes the B'nei Yisrael to break their covenant with Hashem. He connects this process with last week's parasha, Behar, on Yoveil, which placed the "whole material and social matters of the nation under Hashem." Man was free to pursue possessions and enjoyment as long as those pursuits were moral within the codes of the Torah. When the Torah warned against failing to listen to Hashem, the downward spiral of the B'nei Yisrael was "in neglecting 'learning' Torah." This theoretical sin would begin the practical defection and the eventual exile of the people. "Once you have lost the theoretical knowledge and understanding of the Torah, and, for any reason whatsoever, put it behind your back in practical life, your conscience gives you no rest, until, to justify yourself to yourself, you have sophistically converted the defection into progress, and accustomed yourself to look down on faithful adherence of the Torah as something to be conquered."

The Ramban supports a different approach which occurs near the middle of the process, sins four and five. He believes that the rejection of the ordinances, laws that defy our understanding and are dependent on obedience of Hashem's word alone, leads to the rejection of the entire package of commandments. The Ramban posits that most people accept the concept of ordinances and would not question ordinances that involve the death penalty for murder or the proper payments of damage to property caused by negligence. People only begin to question when it involves the death penalty for someone who willingly participates in forbidden sexual intercourse or profanes the Sabbath. Once one set of laws and punishments is rejected, the entire set of commandments is placed in doubt, especially when one understands the impact of this rejection in light of the approach of HaRav Hirsch.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin compares the statement issued at Har Sinai, "Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will listen (obey) (Ex. 24:7) to the similar statement in our parasha, "But if you will not listen to me and will not perform all of these commandments (26:14)." The change of order between the first statement and the second marks a change in perspective that indicates that a deterioration has begun. The obedience to the laws is no longer a response to Hashem's love, but is now complicated by

desire and temptation which cloud man's thinking. Man still believes in Hashem but is able to justify his temptations. This begins the spiral of distancing from Hashem and justifying that separation.

Hashem ended the tochacha with a promise of redemption and return. "I will remember for them the covenant of the forebears, those whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be Elokim for them, I am Hashem." We are fortunate to live at a time when we experience Hashem's forgiveness, and we witness a miraculous return to learning Torah and mitzvot. But we are far from carrying out our side of the covenant. We have watched the world reject Hashem and His moral values and its attempt to replace those values with "progressive" ideas. We must reject the world's values when they contradict Hashem's. We do not yet live in peace and prosperity. We are still under Hashem's decrees found in the tochacha. But we have been given an opportunity to return to Hashem and to reestablish our covenant with Him. Let us return to the understanding that Hashem's laws show His love of our people and are only for our benefit. Hashem is our Father, let us return to being His son. ©2022 Rabbi D. Levin

#### **RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND**

## **TorahWeb**

*Transcribed by David Twersky*

*Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman*

**T**he first Medrash Rabbah in Parshas Bechukosai 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 Bechukosai 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 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'maasim!

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! ©2022 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

