



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

בהר בחקתי תש"ף
Behar-
Bechukotai
5780

The Power of a Curse

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Thinking about consequences helps us to make good choices.



PARSHAT BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI IN A NUTSHELL

Behar is just a single chapter, but this short parsha has a very important message – it teaches us how to build a fair society where everyone is free but also equal.

Sometimes you can have freedom without equality, such as in a country where everyone is free to do whatever job they wish, and spend their money however they wish, but some people are poor and some are rich, so not everyone is equal (this is called a capitalist free economy). And sometimes you can have equality without freedom, where everyone has the same but the government take away a lot of choices (for example communism or socialism). Rarely do we see both.

The powerful insight of the Torah is that you can have both, but not at the same time. Therefore time itself has to become part of the solution, in the form of the seventh year (the *shmita* year) and, after seven sabbatical cycles, the fiftieth year – the Jubilee (*Yovel*). These work as corrections to the inequalities caused by the free market that allow some

to become rich while others suffer the loss of land, home, and even freedom.

Bechukotai is mainly God speaking about the blessings that the Israelites will receive if they keep the Torah, and the curses/bad things that will happen to them if they do not. If we believe that God acts in history, rewards the good and punishes the bad, then we can have hope – this is an idea that was given to the world by the Torah. The remarkable statement at the end of the curses - that whatever happens, God will not reject His people, provides us with eternal hope throughout Jewish history.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How can each of these two *parshiot* give us hope?



THE CORE IDEA

The book of Vayikra ends with blessings and curses. The blessings will be the result if the people keep their covenant with God. The curses will happen to them if they break their promises. The general principle is clear. If people behave well, the nation will do well. If they behave badly, eventually bad things will happen.

It is the custom to read the *tochachah*, the curses section (both here and also in the parallel passage in Devarim 28), in a low voice in the synagogue, which makes them a little less terrifying than if they were said out loud. But they are awful enough however they are read. And both here and in

Devarim, the section on curses is longer and far more graphic than the section on blessings.

This seems to contradict a basic principle of Judaism, that God's generosity to those who are faithful to Him is far more than His punishment of those who are not.

The whole idea contained in the 13 Attributes of Compassion (Shemot 34:6-7) is that God's love and forgiveness are stronger than His justice and punishment. Why, therefore, are the curses in this week's parsha so much longer and so much more emphasised than the blessings?

The answer is that God loves and forgives, but on the condition that, when we do wrong, we admit it, show we regret the act, make it up to those we have harmed, and repent. In the middle of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is the statement, “Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Shemot 34:7). God does not forgive the sinner who doesn’t repent, because were He to do so, it would make the world a worse place, not a better one. More people would sin if there were no downside to doing so.

The reason the curses are so dramatic is not because God seeks to punish, but the exact opposite. The Talmud tells us that God weeps when He allows disaster to strike His people: “Woe to Me, that due to their sins I destroyed My house, burned My Temple and exiled them [My children]

among the nations of the world.” (Brachot 3a) The curses were meant as a warning. They were intended to put off, scare, discourage. They are like a parent warning a young child not to play with electricity because it is dangerous. The parent may deliberately intend to scare the child, but they do so out of love, not severity.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How can punishments be given in love?
2. Can you think of a time when your parent or teacher gave you a warning? Did it affect your behaviour?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

LouAnne Johnson was a retired U.S. Marine who decided to become a teacher as a second career. But she soon found the job was more of a challenge than she could have ever imagined. When she arrived on her first day, she found she would be teaching of a group of tough, hostile teenagers from underprivileged backgrounds. Many of her students were involved in gang warfare and drug-dealing. Not one was motivated to learn, and they all refused to cooperate or listen to her at all.

LouAnne was desperate to reach the students and make a difference in their lives, and tried to persuade them to learn in numerous ways, including using contemporary music, teaching them karate, and using themes and language of the street, helping her students to connect their reality to the subjects they were studying. She even rewarded their efforts with candy bars, reward incentives, and a trip to a theme park (much to the anger of the school authorities!)

These creative approaches had various degrees of success, but she finally found the secret to motivate her students when she had the idea to give each of them an A grade for the whole year at the beginning of the semester! She told them that she believed deep down that each of them deserved the A, and had the potential to achieve it, and it was there for the taking. Now all they had to do was maintain it by working hard throughout the year!

Sometimes being given something in reward is less effective at motivating us than the threat of losing something!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How is this story related to the parsha?
2. What lesson can we learn from it for our everyday life?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Martin Luther King would say, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Not always immediately but ultimately, good is rewarded with good, bad with bad.

Our parsha starkly sets out the terms of that equation: if you obey God, there will be rain in its season, the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit; there will be peace. But if you ignore God, things will not flourish. The curses are almost three times as long and much more dramatic in the language they use:

“But if you will not listen to Me... then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength...

I will break your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze... I will send wild

animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted... Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins...

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.” (Vayikra 26:14-37)

There is a savage eloquence here. The images are vivid. There is a pulsing rhythm to the verses, as if the harsh fate that would overtake the nation is inevitable, cumulative and accelerating. The effect is intensified by the repeated hammer blows: “If after all this ... if you remain hostile ... if in spite of these things ... if

in spite of this.” The word *keri*, key to the whole passage, is repeated seven times. It appears nowhere else in the whole of Tanach. Its meaning is uncertain. It may mean rebelliousness, obstinacy, indifference, hard-heartedness, reluctance or being left-to-chance. But the basic principle is clear. If you act toward Me with *keri*, says God, I will turn that same attribute against you, and you will be devastated.

The classic example is the book of Jonah. God tells Jonah the Prophet to go to Nineveh and warn the people, “In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed.” He does so. The people take him seriously. They repent. God then relents from His threat to destroy the city. Jonah complains to God that He has made him look ridiculous. His prophecy has not come true. Jonah has failed to understand the difference between a prophecy and a prediction. If a prediction comes true, it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true, it has failed. The Prophet tells the people what will happen *if* they fail to change. A prophecy is not a prediction but a warning. It describes a fearful future in order to persuade the people to avert it. That is what the *tochachah* is.

In their new book, *The Power of Bad*, John Tierney and Roy Baumeister argue on the basis of substantial scientific evidence, that bad has far more impact on us than good. We pay more attention to bad news than good news. Bad health makes more difference to us than good health. Criticism affects us more than praise. A bad reputation is easier to acquire and harder to lose than a good one.

Humans are designed – “hardwired” – to take notice of and rapidly react to threat. Failing to notice a lion is more dangerous than failing to notice a ripened fruit on a tree. Recognising the kindness of a friend is good and virtuous, but not as significant as ignoring the animosity of an enemy. One traitor can betray an entire nation.

It follows that the stick is a more powerful motivator than the carrot. Fear of the curse is more likely to affect behaviour than

desire for the blessing. Threat of punishment is more effective than promise of reward. Tierney and Baumeister document this over a wide range of cases from education to crime rates. Where there is a clear threat of punishment for bad behaviour, people behave better.

Judaism is a religion of love and forgiveness. But it is also a religion of justice. The punishments in the Torah are there not because God loves to punish, but because He wants us to act well. Imagine a country that had laws but no punishments. Would people keep the law? No. Many people would choose to take advantage of the efforts of others without contributing oneself. Without punishment, there is no effective law, and without law there is no society. The more powerfully one can present the bad, the more likely people are to choose the good. That is why the *tochachah* is so powerful, dramatic and fear-inducing. The fear of bad is the most powerful motivator of good.

I believe that being warned of the bad helps us to choose the good. Too often we make the wrong choices because we don't think of the consequences. That's how global warming happened. That's how financial crashes happen. That's how societies lose their solidarity. Too often, people think of today, not the day after tomorrow. The Torah, painting in the most graphic detail what can happen to a nation when it loses its moral and spiritual bearings, is speaking to us in every generation, saying: Beware. Take note. Don't function on autopilot. Once a society begins to fall apart, it is already too late. Avoid the bad. Choose the good. Think long and choose the road that leads to blessings.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think are we often too quick to make bad decisions without thinking through the consequences?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

There is nothing inevitable about the division, fragmentation, extremism, isolation, the economics of inequality or the politics of anger that have been the mood of Britain and America in recent years. They have been the legacy of the misplaced belief that societies can function without a moral bond. They cannot, or at least not for long. That is why we are where we are. But we can change. Societies have moved from 'I' to 'We' in the past. They did so in the nineteenth century. They did so in the twentieth century. They can do so in the future. And it begins with us.

Morality, p. 336



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Do you think that in the larger picture, over time, there is justice in the world (as the quote from Martin Luther King suggests)?
2. Why is the list of curses so much longer than the list of blessings, when God is slow to anger and full of compassion?
3. Why isn't love of God enough of an incentive to keep the covenant?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. Behar gives us hope that society can be fair if we build it on good values and institute the laws taught in the Torah. Bechukotai contains the promise that God will never reject us as His people. Both of these ideas give us hope for the long-term future of the world.

THE CORE IDEA

1. This is a difficult concept for a child to understand. Punishments are there to guide and improve us. They help us to learn about consequences. They are sometimes based on justice and sometimes on an educational process, to improve and strengthen the one being punished. When a parent (and hopefully a teacher also) warns a child, and then follows through with the promised punishment, it is because they love the child and want them to learn and grow.
2. This question gives the child the opportunity to relate to the concept of the *tochechah* (the curses) in a personal way from their own life experience.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. LouAnne Johnson tried hard to motivate her students by giving them incentives – things they would receive if they worked hard. But the most effective motivation for them was when she gave them something for free but told them they had to work hard or they would lose it. The threat of losing something was more effective than the promise of reward. This is similar to the *tochechah* which is a dire warning that if the Israelites do not keep their covenant with God, terrible things will happen. It was a more powerful motivator than the promise of reward (the blessings).
2. When we consider actions and decisions that we must take in our lives, asking what we stand to lose is sometimes a stronger question than what we stand to gain. Sometimes we make bad, impulsive decisions because we do not fully think through the possible consequences.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Although some philosophers such as Descartes and Kant thought humans were rational and capable of making decisions based on logic, others (such as Hume) believed we are primarily emotional beings who make decisions on the basis of feelings, desires, and drives of which we may be barely conscious. We justify our choices, but brain scans show that we may have made those choices before being aware that we had done so. Daniel Kahneman, the behavioural economist demonstrated that we have a dual-system or twin-track brain. One track is rapid, instinctive, emotional, and subconscious. The other is slower, conscious, deliberative, and calculating. The former allows us to react quickly to situations of immediate potential danger. Without it, we and our ancestors would not have survived. But we also have the ability to “think slow,” to pause and reflect. All animals have desires. Only human beings are capable of passing judgement on these desires – of asking, should I or should I not satisfy this desire? Too often people use the former way of thinking and need help taking the time to think through the consequences more fully.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. This is a deep and philosophical question that humans have struggled with throughout history. Religious philosophers have worked hard to find ways to understand justice in a world that often feels deeply unjust. That is why MLK described the arc of the moral universe as long. Sometimes we do not see the arc return and justice prevail. Ultimately those who have faith in God playing a role in history will believe that justice will always ultimately prevail.
2. By design, in order to be an effective deterrent for the people to break their covenant with God. Psychology shows us that negative outcomes (punishments, for example) are a more powerful motivator than positive outcomes (rewards).
3. The ultimate goal is for our behaviour to be motivated by our love of God. But this is a difficult level to reach, and in the meantime, in order to get to that level, we need a more powerful system of incentives – reward and punishment. Just as a child, in early developmental stages, cannot be rationalised with, but will respond to reward and punishment, so spiritually we need to work hard to transcend our need for external incentives for our behaviour.