

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BEHAR - BECHUKOTAI

The "Supplement" to Ma'amad Har Sinai

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This Shabbat we read two parshiyot, Behar and Bechukotai. Many connections exist between the two parshiyot, I would like to suggest that the section of "blessings and curses" in Parashat Bechukotai (generally referred to as the "tokhecha") refers specifically to the observance and transgression - respectively - of the laws of shemitta, addressed in Parashat Behar.

We cite here four of the many proofs to this claim:

1. Parashat Bechukotai presents the blessing that will fall upon Benei Yisrael "if you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments," and the curses they will suffer "if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments." The formulation of the curses places a clear emphasis on the number seven: "And if, for all that, you do not obey Me, I will go on to discipline you sevenfold for your sins" (Vayikra 26:18); "And if you remain hostile toward Me and refuse to obey Me, I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins" (26:21); "I in turn will smite you sevenfold for your sins" (26:24); "I, for My part, will discipline you sevenfold for your sins" (26:28). The repetition of this expression, in which seven emerges as the predominant element, requires explanation. Why must the Torah stress the arrangement of sevens within the curses? Why do the plagues befall Benei Yisrael specifically in series of seven, and why must the Torah repeat this over and over? This emphasis brings us back to the mitzvot of which we read just prior to the blessings and curses, in Parashat Behar, commandments that revolve around the number seven. The shemitta year is observed once in seven years:

"But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of God: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard" (25:4).

This emphasis becomes even stronger with respect to the mitzva of the "yovel" (jubilee year):

"You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the 'teru'a' shofar in the seventh month..."

The nation must sanctify the year of yovel after counting seven times seven years. On the seventh month of this year, the shofar is blown. The remaining mitzvot in Parashat Behar relate, in one way or another, to the two central mitzvot introduced at the parasha's outset, shemitta and yovel. In light of this, it stands to reason that immediately following this section dealing with these commandments, the Torah warns of the repercussions of their neglect and encourages their observance with the promise of blessing. In other words, the blessings and

curses of Parashat Bechukotai refer specifically to the observance, or lack thereof, of shemitta and yovel. If Am Yisrael refrains from agricultural activity during these years, then they will earn the blessings; otherwise, the curses will befall them. The presentation of curses therefore repeatedly stresses the number seven, as it plays an essential role in the institutions of shemitta and yovel.

2. After God's warning about exile should Benei Yisrael disobey Him, He adds,

"And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheath the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin. Then shall the land make up for its sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years. Throughout the time that it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your sabbath years when you were dwelling on it" (26:33-35).

The Torah makes it perfectly clear that the curses, or at least the exile, comes as punishment for the neglect of the laws of shemitta. As Benei Yisrael failed to observe these laws while living in the land, they must go into exile, thereby, against their will, affording the land its period of rest. The same concept arises several verses later: "For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity" (26:43). It is hard to believe that the blessings and curses actually refer to all the mitzvot, and the issue of shemitta serves as merely an example. It seems far more reasonable to read these verses as indicating that the curses relate specifically to this mitzva.

3. An additional point reinforcing this assumption is the Torah's reference to the specific time of the issuance of these curses. As we know from the opening verse of Sefer Vayikra - "He called to Moshe; and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting" - Moshe heard this sefer in the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting). The opening of Parashat Behar, by contrast, which (at least according to the Rashbam's interpretation) introduces the laws of shemitta and yovel, suggests that these mitzvot were issued earlier: "God spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai, saying..." In other words, the verses that follow this introduction present a series of laws transmitted to Moshe while the nation still stood at Mount Sinai, prior to the commandments issued in the preceding sections of Sefer Vayikra. If so, then we must identify the end of this unit. In other words, at which point does the Torah bring this "interruption" to a close and return to the chronological record of mitzvot issued from the Ohel Moed? The Torah itself explicitly answers this question immediately following the section of curses: "These are the laws, rules and instructions that God established, through Moshe on Mount Sinai, between Himself and Benei Yisrael" (26:46). Thus, the section from the beginning of Behar through the end of the curses comprises an independent unit transmitted to Moshe on Mount Sinai, but, for some reason, recorded only here, towards the end of Sefer Vayikra. This unit consists of two subsections: the laws of shemitta and yovel, and the blessing and curses. Apparently, the latter section comes as a direct response to the first; the blessings and curses result directly from the observance and disregard of the laws of shemitta and yovel.

4. The Torah concludes its discussion of the agricultural laws relevant to yovel with the following promise: "You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security" (25:18-19). Several parallels exist between these verses and those in the beginning of Bechukotai in reference to the blessings. First, the expression "chukotai" (My laws) in Behar clearly brings to mind the opening words in Parashat Bechukotai: "If you follow My laws..." (26:3). Secondly, both contexts employ the same syntax to describe Benei Yisrael's compliance with the laws. Compare "and faithfully keep My rules" in Behar, regarding yovel, with "... and faithfully keep My commandments" at the beginning of the section of blessings (26:3). Most clearly, however, the Torah promises the same reward in both contexts. Regarding the laws of yovel, God assures the people that compliance therewith will result in the blessing, "you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security." The blessings in Bechukotai repeat this promise almost verbatim: "you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land" (26:5). Already in Parashat Behar, the Torah alludes to the reward for proper observance of these laws; the detailed description of these blessings later, in the beginning of Parashat Bechukotai.

In my shiur on this parasha three years ago [www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.58/32behar.htm], we addressed the obvious question of why the Torah places the section of blessings and curses specifically here, in the closing chapters of Sefer Vayikra. This time I would like to discuss a parallel issue: when and in what context was this section said at Mount Sinai? Immediately following the Ten Commandments? In the middle of Parashat Mishpatim? Perhaps Benei Yisrael learned of the mitzvot of shemitta and yovel even before the Ten Commandments?

As background for the answer, we must first consider the dispute between Rashi and the Ramban regarding the covenantal ceremony of Mount Sinai, described towards the end of Parashat Mishpatim (Shemot 24). Rashi claims that this ceremony occurred before the Ten Commandments, earlier than the point at which it appears in the text. The Ramban, by contrast, argues for the chronological presentation of the events, by which this ceremony took place only after Benei Yisrael heard the Ten Commandments.

This issue concerns us here because of a single verse in the Torah's description of that ceremony:

"He [Moshe] took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, 'All that God has spoken, we will do and we will hear!'" (Shemot 24:7).

Here, too, Rashi and Ramban engage in a dispute, one which necessarily follows from their previous debate. The Ramban (commentary to Shemot 24:1) claims that,

"on that day, Moshe wrote down in a scroll all that he had been commanded: laws, statutes and rules. He arose early in the morning the very next day to enter them into a covenant for all of [the commandments]. He built an altar, offered sacrifices, placed half the blood on God's altar and the other half in basins, and took the scroll he had written the previous day and read it aloud to them. They reaffirmed their acceptance of the covenant with Him, and they said, 'All that God has spoken we will do...'"

As stated, the Ramban reads the verses as written in chronological sequence. Therefore, the "scroll of the covenant"

that Moshe read consisted of the Ten Commandments and Parashat Mishpatim, the content of which he had previously heard from God. Rashi cannot accept this interpretation, for in his view, this ceremony occurred before Ma'amad Har Sinai. To what, then, does the "scroll of the covenant" refer? Rashi (Shemot 24:7) explains that it consisted of the Torah from Bereishit until Matan Torah, plus the mitzvot taught to the people at Mara. Sefer Bereishit and the story from the Exodus through Benei Yisrael's arrival at Sinai form the basis of the covenant entered into by God and the people. All this is therefore included in the "scroll of the covenant" that Moshe now reads before the nation.

It seems to me, however, that the most convincing interpretation of the "scroll of the covenant" is found in our parasha, Behar/Bechukotai.

To properly understand the role of the blessings and curses at Ma'amad Har Sinai, let us turn our attention to the second covenant between God and Benei Yisrael, the one conducted just prior to the nation's entry into the land: the covenant of "Arvat Moav."

In effect, all of Sefer Devarim constitutes a lengthy introduction to the covenant and Moshe's urging the people to uphold the terms thereof. The central body of the covenant appears in Devarim 27, but for our purposes here we will concern ourselves with the accompanying series of blessing and curses. The introductions to the blessings and curses strongly resemble those in our parasha:

"Now, if you obey the Lord your God, to observe faithfully all His commandments which I enjoy upon you this day..."; "But if you do not obey the Lord your God to observe faithfully all His commandments and laws which I enjoy upon you this day, all these curses shall come upon you and take effect..." (Devarim 28:1, 15).

We can almost say that these verses embody the core of this covenant: what will occur should they uphold their terms of the agreement, and what will happen, Heaven forbid, if they do not. The Torah concludes this section as follows: "These are the terms of the covenant which God commanded Moshe to conclude with Benei Yisrael in the land of Moav, IN ADDITION TO THE COVENANT WHICH HE HAD MADE WITH THEM AT CHOREV [=SINAI]" (Devarim 28:69). This closing verse appears specifically after the presentation of the blessings and curses, as this "supplement" comprises an essential element of the covenant; alongside the content of the covenant, the Torah presents the means of enforcing its terms.

Significantly, the verse draws a clear parallel between this covenant, which immediately preceded Benei Yisrael's entry into the land, and the "covenant which He had made with them at Chorev" - the covenant of Sinai. Could the covenant of Sinai have been made without this "supplement"? Did the ceremony at Sinai take place without the promise of reward for the fulfillment of the covenant and the punishment for its neglect?

Our answer is clear: the covenant of Sinai did, indeed, feature this supplement, but it appears now, at the end of Sefer Vayikra. It is this function that the blessings and curses of Parashat Bechukotai serve.

If we are correct, then we may perhaps speculate that "the scroll of the covenant" that Moshe reads aloud at Sinai refers to Parashat Behar/Bechukotai. Here the nation heard the special obligations of Eretz Yisrael (shemitta and yovel) and here they heard the detailed blessings and curses potentially awaiting them. Upon hearing all this, they declared, "All that God has spoken, we will do and we will hear," affirming their

acceptance of the conditions of the covenant - the reward and/or punishment in accordance with their loyalty to the covenant.

In light of all this, we must return to our opening remarks and qualify them. The blessings and curses of Parashat Bechukotai do, indeed, relate specifically to the commandments in Parashat Behar, shemitta and yovel. In actuality, however, they apply to the entire content of the covenant of Sinai.

The Torah mentions here - at the end of Sefer Vayikra - a whole series of parshiyot originally given at Sinai that includes specifically the mitzvot related to "kedushat ha-aretz" (the sanctity of the land). [As stated, we elaborated further on this issue back when we were young, three years ago.] Along therewith, it includes the elements always accompanying the making of a covenant, the blessings and curses. But those blessings and curses were actually presented to the people in relation to the totality of the Sinaitic covenant and all its content.

As we read the ceremony of Parashat Mishpatim, we experience the joy and inspiration associated with the love and goodwill between Am Yisrael and their Father in heaven manifest in this covenant. I certainly do not wish to undermine these feelings, which assume a critical place in communal and individual avodat Hashem. However, this Shabbat we read a supplement to this covenant, which, alongside the deep, spiritual motivation and voluntarism associated with entering into a covenant with the Almighty, adds the reward and punishment, which both encourage and threaten, seeking to preserve the integrity of this special covenant. If parashat Mishpatim presents the side of "ahavat Hashem," parashat Bechukotai adds "yir'at Hashem," without which the covenant is not complete.

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