

Parashat Bechukotai:

Back to Eden

The choice could not be more clearly expressed: Blessing or curse, success or failure. This week, the Torah presents us with two alternative options for the future of the Jewish people. It pictures for us a vision of burgeoning growth, security and prosperity, and then the alternative; a spectacle of destruction, exile and desolation. What will determine the one over the other? On what does our national fortune depend?

“ If you follow my laws, and faithfully observe my commandments, I will grant you the rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce...you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in the land. I will grant peace in the land and you will be able to sleep untroubled. I will give the land respite from vicious beasts.... You shall give chase to your enemies and they shall fall before you by the sword. I will look upon you with favour and make you fertile and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you... I will establish my abode in your midst and I will not spurn you. I will walk in your midst; I will be your God and you will be my people.”
(Sefer Vayikra 26:3-12)

This is the good news. These are the blessings that will be bestowed on the nation as a reward for their adherence to God's law. The bad news - the curses - span the next thirty or so verses and detail an entire anthology of horrors, telling a story of unthinkable horror, the most awful atrocities that could befall any nation.

“But if you do not obey me and do not observe all these commandments, if you reject my laws and spurn my rules... and break my covenant, I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you... I will break your proud glory ... your land will not yield its produce.... I will loose wild beasts against you ... I will bring the sword against you ... you will eat the flesh of your children (out of hunger)... I will heap your carcasses ... I will lay your cities in ruin...I will make the land desolate ... I will scatter you among the nations... as for the survivors... the sound of a driven leaf will send them into flight.”
(Selections from 26:14-45)

The Shiur :

SECTION 1 : THE STRUCTURE OF THE BLESSINGS AND THE CURSES.

INVERSE SYMMETRY

When reading Parshat Bechukotai it is worth noting the disproportionate length of the curses as compared to the blessings. The list of curses is three times the length of the blessings and far more detailed and explicit in its descriptions. Why the disparity between the two lists? The Ibn Ezra comments:

“The mindless will say that the curses exceed the blessings, but they do not speak the truth. Rather, the blessings are presented in general form whereas the curses are spelled out in detail. This is to frighten the listener and instil fear into him. If you look into the verses carefully you will understand my words.”

So, there is a clear symmetry between the blessings and the curses. Indeed, the verses do bear his theory out. All the elements of the blessings find themselves - in reverse form - in the curses

Blessings:	Curses :
rain	drought
agricultural abundance	famine
peace	war
fertility and population increase	bloodshed and genocide
wealth	poverty
God's tangible presence	God's absence
the Land of Israel	exile

As we can clearly see, one list is a precise inversion of the other. So why the difference in length? According to the Ibn Ezra, the lengthy account of terror and doom is designed to frighten us. As our stomach churns at the thought of such awful unthinkable suffering, we might just consider changing our lives for the better. Even the Torah is not averse to using a certain terror to induce a person to turn to the good.

However, what we have said up to now is not entirely accurate. In one sense, the pattern of the curses IS different to that of the blessings. The text gives the impression that as reward for keeping God's law, the blessings - ALL the blessings, as an entire unit - will be

bestowed upon Israel. The curses, on the other hand, are divided into FIVE SECTIONS, each new section dependent on continued rebellion and disobedience:

“If you do not listen to me.... and if you will still not listen.... and if you remain hostile to me... and if these things fail to discipline you... ” (26:14,18,21,23,27).

It would seem that the curses arrive in stages, gradually, an incremental build-up. Each stage is dependent upon our persistence to ignore or defy God. This structure suggests to us that the process of the curses can be halted. We can stop the curses mid-flow, thus averting disaster, if only we change our behaviour.

BLESSING: CHARTING A PROCESS.

So, if they truly are parallel, let us focus on the blessings, the optimistic side of the parsha.

Earlier we suggested that the blessings are a straightforward linear unit. Indeed, as opposed to the curses, this is what the text might initially suggest. But there is a reading of this section that presents a more complex structure. The 19th Century German commentator, R. David Zvi Hoffman divides the blessings into five distinct groups. (The fivefold division is another example of how the blessings and curses parallel each other.)

v.4-5	First blessing	Agricultural abundance
v.6	Second blessing	Peace
v.7-8	Third blessing	Military success
v.9-10	Fourth blessing	God's special care: population growth and economic prosperity.
v.11-12	Fifth blessing	God's presence amidst Israel

One can view these blessings as five INDEPENDENT units; separate blessings, without a causal link, each significant for the nation even in the absence of the other blessings.

But alternatively we might propose that these blessings are a PROCESS. The blessings begin with the rain ensuring agricultural success. The result: That you will “eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in the land” (v.5) There will be plentiful food supplies. This in turn will ensure that there will be no need to leave the country to procure food supplies (as is familiar from many Biblical famine stories – Abraham, Joseph, Ruth). This is the “security” of the land.

We then move on to the blessing of peace, a peace

that reigns in the streets and byways of the country, the ability to sleep soundly, the absence of dangerous animals that would seriously restrict personal safety in rural areas.

In the next stage, we are promised divine assistance in the event of foreign attack. Israel will vanquish the enemy with the greatest of ease.

But the fourth blessing opens a new, higher dimension with the phrase “I will turn to you”. This phrase intimates that God is taking a closer interest in the affairs of Israel. This is what we call Divine Providence – “Hashgacha”. God protects our population from youngest to oldest, ensuring high numbers of children (‘and I will make you fertile’) and low rates of infant mortality (‘and multiply’), as well as the exceptional levels of crop production leaving extensive food stores for the nation.

The fifth and final stage of blessing moves beyond God's concern for our physical well-being. This stage is one of God “walking” amongst Israel, establishing his presence amongst the people. This is spiritual communion, the crescendo: A unity between the nation and God.

So these verses – the Berachot - can be read as an upward spiral, a process of God's increasing closeness. The blessings describe God's care, first from afar, and then in an intimate, almost personal concern: “I will turn to you”. In another dimension we should note how the blessings begin with the physical and end with the spiritual. So it is possible that the blessings create a progression, a movement of growth and intensification.

Now we see the symmetry between the *berachot* and *kelalot* in perfect clarity. One is truly the inverse of the other. The Ibn Ezra's comment explains to us that the length of the text should not deter us. When we view things at close quarters we realise that both the *berachot* and the *kellalot* are split into 5 sections, and that for each, the text describes a process of escalating intensity. In the *Berachot*, we begin with God's material blessings and we climax with His holy presence permeating the collective existence of the nation. Likewise, the curses intensify incrementally and they reach their ultimate depth with the exile of the nation from its homeland.

SECTION II: ERETZ YISRAEL and the RETURN TO THE GARDEN OF EDEN.

Sometimes, a single comment can open our minds to a whole new understanding. I would like to draw our attention to such a statement, a thought that generates a rather fascinating image within the blessings narrative. The comment that will introduce this theme

comes from RASHI.

“(v.12) **I will be ever present (lit. walk) in your midst:** I will walk with you as in the Garden of Eden, like one of you, and you will not tremble from my very presence. Maybe you will not fear me at all? - ‘I will be for you as a Lord’”

Rashi wishes to compare the world of the blessings with the Garden of Eden. He draws on a textual parallel. In the Garden of Eden, Adam experienced God as “**walking** through the garden.” (Genesis 3:8) What is this “walking?” It would seem that this is a metaphor for a constant divine presence that was synonymous with the environment of Gan Eden. Adam was able to commune with God without fear or apprehension. An unusual casualness characterised the Man-God interaction.

This incredible state of things lasted only for a short time. It was shattered by Man's sin. Bereshit describes how, after his sin, man felt a need to hide from God, unable to face him openly. What has happened? The act of sin - so transparent, so stark – betrays and ruptures the very relationship between Adam and God. Now the easygoing relationship between God and man has been shattered. Man and God are distanced, separated; and the closeness that Man felt in the presence of God is replaced with guilt, fear, foreboding and shame. Adam cannot withstand the divine presence without experiencing trepidation.

And now, back to Parshat Bechukotai. Here, in the “Blessings” passage, God talks once again about “**walking**” in the midst of the people. Rashi has sensitised us to this phrase. Are we seeing a resurfacing of an Eden-like reality? The answer is – Yes! The Torah is communicating something to us. That as a response to man obeying God's law, man can once again “walk” with God, communicate with God in a straightforward manner. The Man-God connection is repaired. Or we might say that the God-Man relationship has been restored because Man himself is repaired. Man has healed himself.

If our reading of this comment by Rashi is correct, then we must infer a remarkable and startling conclusion. That our Blessings describe a process whereby Man “returns,” in some way, to Eden.

WILD ANIMALS.

But can man return to Eden - the place which preceded sin? Do the blessings of Parshat Bechukotai lead to the Garden of Eden?

It is here that we turn to the Ramban. NACHMANIDES examines the notion of the removal of vicious animals (verse 6). He wishes too understand the strange and puzzling phraseology in the passuk. Ramban quotes an ancient Rabbinic dispute, from the

period of the Mishna as to the correct reading of the verse. How do we read verse 6? - Will vicious animals cease to enter the land, or, will the animals simply stop acting in a vicious manner?

“In the view of Rabbi Yehuda the text reads simply; that vicious animals will not enter the land. In the wake of the plenty and other blessings of goodness, the cities will fill with people and (due to the increased population gaining greater control over the land) wild animals will not venture near a populated place. But Rabbi Simeon's opinion states that ‘they will cease causing harm’ i.e. the evil (violence) of the animals will cease to exist in the world. This is correct FOR THE LAND OF ISRAEL AT THE TIME OF ISRAEL'S FULFILLMENT OF THE COMMANDMENTS WILL BE AS THE WORLD WAS AT ITS VERY BEGINNINGS BEFORE THE SIN OF ADAM. No beast attacking man. As it states (Talmud Berachot 33a) ‘It is not the serpent which kills but sin which kills.’” (Commentary to 26:6)

This daring reading of Ramban spells out a radically different perception of the blessings passage and for that matter - of Jewish History! What is the meaning of these blessing? What sort of world do we create by following God's word? Ramban tells us that in the era of total commitment to God's law, we can go back in time, catapulting ourselves to the pre-sin world of Eden, where man and beast lived in harmonious coexistence. The world of the blessings IS the Garden of Eden with all its associated blessings; God's intense presence and closeness, the absence of sin, all worldly needs effortlessly at hand.

CURSES REVERSED

In this context, it is valuable to make an examination of the changes that took place when man was forced to leave the garden. Man and woman ate from the Tree of Knowledge and were banished. Before they left, they were each cursed. To woman: “I will make most severe your pangs of childbearing...” (Gen 3:16). To man, “cursed shall be the earth because of you; By toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles will it sprout up for you, but your food shall be the grasses of the field...” (Gen 3:17-18). So we have hardship in two areas: pain in childbirth and the exhausting task of tilling the land for food.

Look again at the blessing passage. It is precisely these two elements that reverse themselves. In the narrative of the “blessings”, agriculture becomes easy, and bringing children into the world is somehow effortless. The curses of Adam and Eve would seem to have disappeared. Why? Because we are back in the Garden of Eden! We have returned to a non-sin world.

THE LAND OF ISRAEL

We have drawn upon the Garden of Eden imagery as a potent subtext to the blessings, however what does it all mean? Is the Land of Israel the Garden of Eden? If not, are we seriously suggesting that Eden might reappear in a time that Jews re-embrace their tradition with wholehearted sincerity and commitment?

Nachmanides, this time in his commentary to Genesis, establishes a common ground, a shared reality that establishes a connection between Israel and Eden. It is in the innate hyper-sensitivity of these places to the dimension of the spiritual and to improper human conduct:

“The Torah began with the story of creation the Garden of Eden and the creation of man; how God invested man with dominance over the world and control of it. The Garden of Eden - the choicest of places in the world - was his dwelling place. But his sin prompted his banishment. The generation of the great flood were banished from the face of the globe and only the righteous amongst them (Noah) was rescued. ...It is the way of God, then, from time immemorial that when a nation continues to sin, it will lose its place and home and another nation will replace it.”

Nachmanides establishes this basic principle - first taught in Eden – and he applies it in greater force regarding the Land of Israel, which is “the choicest of places” just like Eden.

“He expelled those who rebelled against him from the Land of Israel and placed his loyal servants there. Israel must know that they merit the land only through their loyal service to God. If they sin the land will vomit them out.”

The Land of Israel and the Garden of Eden are both spiritually attuned. They both act as a spiritual barometer and tolerate their inhabitants accordingly. If God’s ethic is followed, it becomes a paradise; a place where the worldly is taken care of and one can focus on higher things. However, if God’s laws are rejected and laid aside, the place itself will eject its inhabitants. The land will not withstand wrongdoing.

THE STRUCTURE OF SEFER VAYIKRA

The theme that we described here is one that underlies the latter half of Sefer Vayikra. Sefer Vayikra as a book begins with a focus on the Sanctuary, but in its second half, turns its attention to life outside the sanctuary, to the street, the boardroom, the bedroom; society as a whole.

At the very outset we are given a warning:

“Do not copy the practices of the land of Egypt... or the Land of Canaan to which I am taking you nor shall you follow their culture. My rules alone shall you observe”(18:3-5)

This warning is followed by a list; all the laws of sexual impropriety, adultery incest and the like. And then:

“Do not defile yourself in any of these ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves. The land became defiled and spewed out its inhabitants. But you must keep my laws and my rules and not do any of these abhorrent things ... So let the land not spew you out for defiling it “ (18:24-28)

It would seem that Nachmanides’s theme is clearly stated in the verses. As we have explained on previous occasions, the latter half of the book of Vayikra aims to achieve a holy, ethical society. It outlines certain directives targeting every sphere of our lives in order to refine our behaviour and sensitise our actions. The target is to become a “holy nation” in our land. At the outset the terms are established. We are told that our very presence in the land is dependent on our moral conduct.

The delicate sensitivity of the Holy Land is emphasised both at the start and the end of this section of Sefer Vayikra (See Ramban on 18:24). At the start we are cautioned. At the end we hear the blessing and curses. This is a land that hides enormous reservoirs of goodness, hope and blessing, indeed, the road to paradise itself. But concurrently, there are copious storehouses of doom and destruction.

The potential is astounding. We can find the road back to Eden; but if we fail, the resultant disaster will be similarly proportioned. The book of Vayikra tells us that it is we who hold the keys to the one or to the other.

Shabbat Shalom.