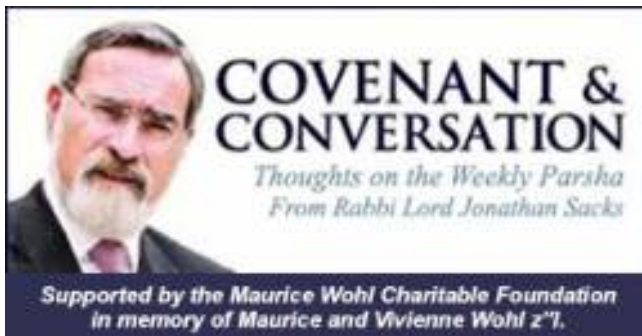


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“We the People”

In the final parsha of the book of Leviticus, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the Sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies:

Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! *They will stumble over each other* as they would before a

sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Lev. 26:36-37)

There is, on the face of it, nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the Sages said: “They will stumble over each other” – read this as ‘stumble *because* of one another’: this teaches that all Israelites are responsible for one another.”¹

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant, he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that their fate and destiny are interlinked – this could have been found in the Torah’s blessings. Why search for it among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another’s fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another’s aid, there is a general sense of well-being. Conversely, if there is a recession many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what about when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of everyday life. While Rashi and his family were living in Christian northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic.

Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the Jews of Spain were enjoying their Golden Age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How could they – as the author of Psalm 137 put it – sing God’s song in a strange land?

There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, “to the most distant lands under heaven.” (Deut. 30:4) There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope.

They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness:

You will try to sell yourselves as slaves – both male and female – but no one will want to buy you. (Deut. 28:68)

Those in Leviticus end with a momentous hope:

But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt’s land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the Lord. (Lev. 26: 44-45)

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people will never be destroyed. Nor will God reject them. The covenant will still be in force and its terms still operative. This means that Jews will always be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they have in the land – for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their enemies they will still be bound by mutual responsibility. They will still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped

political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible (the “Old Testament” as they called it). There they learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail for America, but with one difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson’s Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama’s Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition (always an odd number, three or five or seven). Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics – words never used by British politicians – namely, “We the people.”

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, “Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens.”² In Obama’s words, “You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country’s course.”³ That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* of ‘absolute responsibility’: “The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.”⁴

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

Whoever can forbid their household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] their household. [If they can forbid] their fellow citizens [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] their fellow citizens. [If they can forbid] the whole world [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] the whole world. (Shabbat 54b)

This remains a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of the covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have often argued, to drive American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We *are* our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued throughout this series of essays: that *we are all called on to be leaders*. One may fairly protest: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow? The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant.

Leadership is the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence – be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still.

This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what “my people” had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city’s 23 primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city’s welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently living in Pristina. His answer? Eleven. The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had, along with other international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies

were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, the children were lost and unfocused with no systems of support in place to help them.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, immediately formed volunteer teams of youth leaders, sent out to Kosovo for two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organising summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovo Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations’ children’s organisation. It was in the wake of this that “the Jewish people” – Israel, the American-based “Joint” and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of *chesed*, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help, and they can achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size. When the Jewish

people join hands in collective responsibility, they become a formidable force for good.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Do you feel that the Jewish people still share a collective sense of fate?
2. Would you agree that we live in a covenantal society nowadays – especially during the COVID pandemic – where we are "all in this together"?
3. There is a famous Jewish saying, "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*", meaning "All Israel are responsible for one another". How does this idea impact your thinking about the Jewish peoplehood?

NOTES

1. Sifra ad loc., Sanhedrin 27b, Shavuot 39a.
2. Lyndon B. Johnson, Inaugural Address (United States Capitol, January 20, 1965).
3. Barack Obama, Second Inaugural Address (United States Capitol, January 21, 2013).
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, Washington Square Press, 1966, 707.



Irreplaceable Theology

As the book of Vayikra moves towards its finale, several outstanding issues are clarified. A retrospective overview shows us that although it

began as a book focused on Temple and ritual, it gradually turned to a discussion of other, more general types of holiness, emphasizing kosher food, “kosher” sexual relationships and, finally, other types of interpersonal relationships. The message seems clear: Ritual and Temple service are not replacements for decency. In order to create a holy society, we must concern ourselves both with the ritual and the interpersonal spheres. These two spheres must work in tandem, in harmony, if we are to create and sustain the society that it is our mandate to create.

Despite our superficial impressions, then, Vayikra – “Leviticus” – has a few surprises: The discussion of the holidays in Parashat Emor was not what we might have expected: We might have anticipated that the aspect given most attention in the context of Vayikra would be the sacrifices associated with each festival – but, as we have seen, this is not the case. Instead, the focus is the aspect of holiness, coupled with emphasis of the agricultural identity of each holiday. The transition from this aspect of the holidays to a discussion of *shmittah* and *Yovel* becomes far more natural when considered in this light: The structure and flow of the book teaches us that any discussion of holiness must necessarily include the Land of Israel. Just as the holidays are points of holiness in one dimension, the Land of Israel is a point of holiness in another.

Very subtly, then, the focus of Vayikra shifts to the Land of Israel – which is only natural, being that the Israelites were about to leave Mount Sinai and march to their homeland. Very soon, they would inherit the land - and as soon as the message of our ownership began to sink in, we

were quickly reminded that God is the true owner; the laws of *shmittah* and *Yovel* force us to remember that our ownership is conditional. We are therefore commanded to relinquish our claims to the land one year out of every seven, to share God’s gifts with one and all, and to return the land to its ancestral custodians every 50 years. Slowly the message will sink in: Our ownership is limited. The land ultimately belongs to God, and, as a result, the land is holy. Parashat B’chukotai then goes on to teach us that if we are underserving of this holy land, we will be expelled; such are the consequences of holiness.

Chapter 26 ends in what seems like a grand finale:

I will therefore remember the covenant with their ancestors ... These are the decrees, laws and codes that God set between Himself and the Israelites at Mount Sinai through the hand of Moses. (Vayikra 26:45-46)

And yet, despite the seeming finality, another chapter is tacked on, a chapter that seems anti-climactic, even “disappointing”. It contains discussions of vows, dedications and donations to the Temple... in short, details that somehow take the wind out of our sails after the resounding final notes at the end of the previous chapter. But then, among the details, one law catches our eye:

If [the endowment] is an animal that can be offered as a sacrifice to God, then anything donated to God [automatically] becomes consecrated. One may neither **exchange** it nor offer a **substitute** for it, whether it be a better [animal] for a worse one, or a

worse [animal] for a better one. If he replaces one animal with another, both [the original animal] and its replacement shall be consecrated. (27:9-10)

These verses outline what may be regarded as a strange ‘theory of conservation of holiness:’ Once an object is dedicated to God, it cannot be replaced or “swapped out;” holiness, it seems, “sticks” to it – permanently. Any attempt to replace the consecrated object will only cause an additional object to be consecrated as well; more holiness can enter the world, but the original holiness can never disappear.

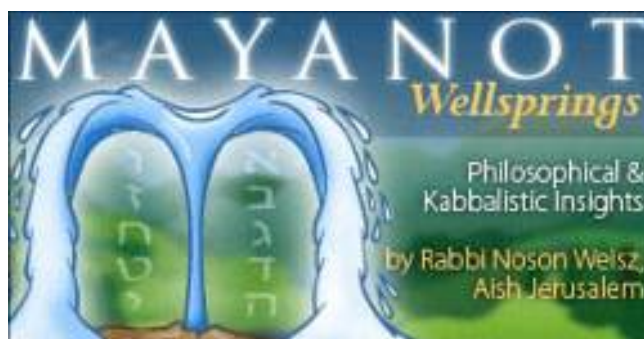
The section that immediately follows discusses ancestral property (27:16). Seen in context, we begin to realize that this chapter is far from a random compilation of commandments: The laws enumerated in Chapter 27, the seemingly “anti-climactic” chapter that follows what we first thought was the closing chord of the book, reflect a deeper theological message: In the course of time, the Jewish People might sin, and thereby forfeit the privilege of living in the Promised Land – but the People, and the Land, once consecrated, are holy forever. They cannot be replaced. God will eventually allow us to return to the Land.

The final section of the book of Vayikra focuses on the power of vows: Words, even human words, are imbued with power, perhaps beyond what we might have imagined. This power is reflection of the Divine Image: The power of speech defines us and sets us apart from the rest of creation, but it comes with tremendous responsibility. God’s

speech creates reality, and human speech is its reflection. God keeps **His** vows, even though we may violate our part of the agreement, and we must do the same. The laws in this final chapter, then, contain an uplifting message: Once something is dedicated for holiness, it cannot be replaced. Even when we have sinned, God will honor His vow; He will return us to our land. Moreover, despite the claims made by newer religions, the Jewish People will never be exchanged for any other “chosen people.” “Replacement theology” is expressly rejected in the final verses of Vayikra. The people who stood at Sinai, despite their having subsequently strayed from a life of holiness, remain dedicated to God, and retain their holiness forever. With this message made clear, Vayikra can come to its completion, and now that we understand the message contained in the seemingly dry, anticlimactic laws of Chapter 27, the final verses of Vayikra are theologically breathtaking:

No distinction may be made between better and worse animals, and no **substitutions** may be made. If a **substitution** is made, then both [the original animal] and its replacement shall be consecrated and not redeemable. These are the commandments that God gave Moses for the Israelites at Mount Sinai.
(Vayikra 27:33,34)

Vayikra, the “book of holiness,” ends with a clear message: The holiness of the Land of Israel, and the holiness of the Jewish People, are eternal.



Dearly Beloved

A person should not say to himself: "I will observe the commandments of the Torah and engage myself in acquiring its wisdom so that I shall merit all the blessings written in it and so that I shall merit life in the World-to-Come. And I shall separate myself from all the transgressions the Torah warned about so that I should be safe from all the curses written in the Torah or so that I should not be cut off from life in the World-to-Come."

It is not proper to serve God in this manner, as one who serves in this fashion is worshipping God out of fear, and this is not the level of Divine service practiced by the prophets or the educated in Torah. The only people who serve God in this manner are the uneducated and ignorant and little children who are taught in this fashion to serve out of fear until their mind matures, and they will serve God out of love.

The one who serves God out of love, engages himself in Torah and its commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom not because of any

worldly benefit; not because of his fear of suffering and evil or to inherit the good; he pursues the truth because it is the truth and the benefits will ultimately follow; this is a very high level which is not reached by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch Abraham, whom God described as "he who loved Me" for his service was only motivated by love. (Maimonides, "Laws of Repentance," 10:1-2)

WHY CONSEQUENCES?

But if God does not want to be served out of fear, why does He give us such an overwhelming list of dire consequences in the case of non-observance as set out in Parshat Bechukotai?

If you will not listen to Me, and you will not fulfill My commandments, if you despise My statutes and your souls loathe My laws ... thereby breaking My covenant, then I will do the same with you. I will impose terror upon you ... I will set my face against you and you will be defeated before your enemies ... (Leviticus 26:14-17)

In view of the above, how can a believer in Torah not serve God out of fear?

Doesn't this contradict the way we begin our morning service by reciting the Psalm: *The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God -- good understanding to all who fulfill His commandments; His praise endures forever.* (Psalms 111:10)

Let us begin our exploration with a story:

About a decade ago Israel had a Torah-observant Minister of Absorption who got himself into political hot water through the following incident. A large group of high school students were injured on a school trip when their bus collided with a train. If memory serves me, the incident took place on Shabbat. In the context of a radio interview the Minister expressed the thought that had these students been Shabbat-observant the particular accident in which they were injured certainly could not have happened and he went on to describe how the merit of Shabbat observance can protect a person from harm in general, and that one cannot violate Shabbat with impunity.

A veritable storm of violent protest descended on his head for daring to suggest a connection between Shabbat violation and the possibility of suffering accidents. So severe was the fallout that the survival of the reigning coalition was seriously threatened.

There is a very serious issue here. Why were people so upset? The minister was only expressing his beliefs after all. What was so offensive? We can explore the underlying issue by asking the following general question: Do actions have consequences or not?

MORAL PUNISHMENT

The answer is not as obvious as it may seem at first. We all accept the fact that if we do not know how to swim we will drown in the river, or that if we happen to be nearby when a bomb explodes, there is a high degree of probability that we will be injured. But this has nothing to do with what we deserve, and is therefore not a consequence of anything we have done. Thus, while it is clear that



Bechukotai (Leviticus 26:3-27:34) *advanced compendium*

had we slept in and therefore not taken the bus on which the terrorist planted his bomb, we would have escaped injury, it is obviously absurd to propose that the injury was an act of retaliation for not sleeping in and taking the bus in time to get to work or to school. Tragedies as far as we understand them are freaks of nature and not the consequences of moral decisions.

In fact, even when it comes to the correction of clear moral violations, such as the execution of murderers, there are many who are quite uneasy about the idea of deserved punishment. Revenge is a barbaric emotion and civilized people should not engage in practicing it. As far as anyone deserving moral punishment, the argument is put forward thus: None of us truly know what anyone else deserves and, it is at least possible that had we grown up in the murderer's socio-economic environment, we ourselves might have behaved in the same fashion. The most we can bring ourselves to say is that the murderer is a danger to society which, therefore, has a right to put him behind bars as a protective measure. We are unwilling to assign retributive consequences to moral behavior.

Of course, we do accept and assign responsibility for stupidity. If the person who knows that he can't swim jumps into the river and drowns, we are all willing to acknowledge that he is directly responsible for his own death. We also have no problem condemning the drunk driver who caused the fatal accident when he knew that he had had too much to drink to be able to drive safely. We find no sympathy for stupidity in our hearts. But we do not acknowledge moral turpitude as a sufficient cause of suffering.

GOD'S VIEW

According to our Torah portion, God takes a different view. His position is that moral actions must have consequences. If you sign a deal to observe the commandments you must accept the fact that you will not be able to violate them with impunity. Wrong moral decisions will bring "the wrath of God" down on your head.

But this is a very superficial understanding of our Torah portion. On a deeper level, the chief message of Parshat Bechukotai is that our view of what constitutes reality is extremely limited. In actuality, the expectation of being able to engage in morally incorrect actions without adverse consequences is exactly parallel to believing that you will not drown in the river even if you do not know how to swim. Both of these false expectations are far more attributable to the distorted interpretation of obvious reality that we diagnose as stupidity than they are to a lack of faith.

Thus, just as drowning in the river when you do not know how to swim cannot be characterized as punishment, neither can the suffering caused by moral turpitude. And just as the good health resulting from following a proper diet- exercise regimen is not a "reward" for good behavior but the natural consequence of wise living, neither does the prosperity that results from proper moral behavior constitute a reward.

THE REAL MESSAGE

The real message of Parshat Bechukotai is that the human-Divine relationship constitutes the bedrock of structured reality. When this relationship is in good shape the world naturally

prospers because of the plentitude of Divine energy that circulates within it, and when it falters, the lack of Divine energy causes a diminishing of the resources necessary for the good life.

To understand the correlation between moral actions and their consequences, we have only to remember that we live in a created world. A created world is not assembled from pre-existing parts, as there is only absolute nothingness out there. The material of creation can only originate in the Creator Himself, who is immaterial by definition. All reality must necessarily be a function of the Divine will.

The Torah describes creation as a series of speeches, nothing more. When God turns His face away and pays less attention, as it were, there is less Divine will available and creation is simply diminished. This has nothing to do with reward and punishment, this is simply the natural consequence of how a world, which was founded and is sustained by pure will, must function.

This explanation can assist us in understanding a fascinating aspect of the way the so-called "curses" of Parshat Bechukotai are presented. The passage regarding the curses describes six different stages.

Each stage is preceded by an introductory statement to the effect that if the curses that have fallen on you till this point do not make you pay attention, than your travails will intensify in the next stage -- in the hope that the greater severity will bring about the desired effect and capture your attention.

In the first three of these stages God simply states that if you will do this, I will bring that on your head. But from the fourth stage introduces a concept referred to as *keri* meaning "chance." For example:

If despite these [catastrophes] you will not be chastised towards Me, and you behave casually [keri] with Me, then, I, too, will behave toward you with casualness [b'keri]. (Leviticus 26:23)

From this point onwards through the rest of the passage, this idea of "casualness" is a recurring theme. In later passages in the Torah, we find the related concept of God concealing His face:

But I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it did. (Deut. 31:18)

TREATING GOD "CASUALLY"

Referring to these verses in our Torah portion, Maimonides makes the following comment:

It is a positive commandment to scream [to God] and sound the trumpets for every public travail; as it is written, *against an enemy who oppresses you, you shall sound short blasts of the trumpets* (Numbers 10:9) that is to say, anything that pressures you whether it is famine, plague, locusts or the like, yell about it to God and sound the trumpets. This commandment comes under the umbrella of repentance -- for if the congregation screams to God and sounds the trumpets when a misfortune happens -- they will



Bechukotai (Leviticus 26:3-27:34)

advanced compendium

realize that it happened to them because of their evil deeds ... and this realization will bring about its removal. But if they fail to scream or sound the trumpets and say, instead, this misfortune that befell us has natural causes and struck us by chance -- this amounts to cruelty as it has the consequence of allowing people to remain stuck in their evil ways, and this will bring other misfortunes in its train, as it is written, *you behave toward Me with casualness, I will behave toward you with a fury of casualness* (Yad Hachazaka, "The Laws of Fasting," 1:1-3)

We are now in a position to understand the reason for the public fury directed at the Minister of Absorption.

Human beings want to walk around with the feeling that their moral behavior is free of natural consequences because this gives them the luxury of acting according to their own conscience. It is not that they feel any strong desire to behave immorally. Rather they want the freedom of being able to decide these issues on their own so that the credit for their "good" decisions belongs entirely to them, whereas their "bad" decisions are free of consequences.

Mankind wants to be in a win-win situation. Their correct decisions, being free of self-interest, certainly entitle them to reward, whereas their wrong decisions carry no consequences.

But if moral behavior has attended consequences than behaving immorally would have to as well. Indeed, it should fall within the parameters of

other sorts of behavior where the governing standard is stupidity. As already stated, there is no reward for avoiding stupidity and anyone who suffers through his own stupidity has only himself to blame.

According to the lesson of Parshat Bechukosai, the passage from Psalms quoted earlier becomes self explanatory:

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God...

The fear of God is not a lofty spiritual pinnacle but merely the beginning of wisdom and good understanding. Whoever doesn't fear God and believes that his actions have no consequences is truly stupid and does not understand the world in which he lives. Fearing God has nothing to do with reward and punishment. It comes under the heading of understanding versus insensitivity.

REWARD, PUNISHMENT AND SPIRITUALITY

So where do reward and punishment and spirituality enter the scheme of things?

Once again let us study our world. In our own world the mere avoidance of foolish behavior does not constitute a legitimate purpose in life. For life to have a purpose, the focus must be on achievement. One must pursue some good and not content himself with the mere avoidance of the pitfalls of stupidity.

Why should Divine service be any different? The mere avoidance of being in violation of the commandments cannot constitute the purpose of life. Such avoidance merely attests to elementary

caution. Foolish behavior causes one to drown in the river. Avoiding it cannot be what God had in mind for human beings when He created the world.

This brings us to the second aspect of the commandments.

The word "*Torah*" in Hebrew connotes guidance and direction. The Maharal explains that the purpose of the Torah is to point the way to reaching God. The purpose of observance is not simply to teach us how to remain within the parameters of reality. The commandments are a way to ascend to a union with God.

The answer is love, as stated in the second part of Maimonides' introductory statement:

The one who serves God out of love, engages himself in Torah and its commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom not because of any worldly benefit, not because of his fear of suffering and evil or to inherit the good. He pursues the truth because it is the truth and the benefits will ultimately follow.

The person who serves God out of fear will avoid violating the commandments but will dedicate his life to pursuing the same things that his non-observant neighbors pursue. He will find his purpose in the pursuit of wealth or enjoyment or social prominence. After all, the mere avoidance of foolishness cannot serve as the positive purpose of life.

When the Minister of Absorption made the connection between the lack of Sabbath observance and susceptibility to accidents -- which is clearly there by-the-way -- he was not

making some lofty spiritual statement that would alter life drastically even if it were widely accepted. The knowledge that one must fear God to avoid drowning in rivers unwittingly merely corrects the distorted vision of reality, but does not in itself serve to alter one's deepest values.

Only the person who serves God out of love will make the observance of the commandments the focus of his life. Only he will go out of his way to arrange his life in a manner that will allow him the opportunity to observe as many commandments as possible. It is he who is likely to devote his life to Torah study and good works so that all his waking activities will take place in the context of observing one of the commandments. He is the one who is after the truth for its own sake and makes the pursuit of this truth his life's goal. The one who observes out of fear is content with simply not falling into rivers where he can drown.

THE PARADOX

Paradoxically to find the area of reward and punishment, a person has to focus on pursuing the truth and forget about reward and punishment. Spiritual union with God must be the ultimate aim. As for the benefits? No need to worry. They will automatically follow.

Parshat Bechukotai (which begins *Im bechuchotai telechu* meaning "If you follow my statutes") not only brings the Book of Leviticus to its end, but is in a sense ends the Torah (that is the part of the Torah which instructs). The Book of Numbers contains only a couple of commandments that are binding on subsequent generations and serves mainly as the history of

the desert generation. The Book of Deuteronomy is based on the words of Moses, although God subsequently commanded him to include these words in the Torah.

Insofar as the Torah is mainly a book of instructions issued by God in the language of commandments, the Book of Leviticus is its climax and brings the book to an end. It is not surprising, therefore, that its final chapter be devoted to teaching the proper perspective of the observant life.

It turns out that to properly observe a commandment one must approach its observance from the dual perspective of love and fear. Without fear, the observance takes place in the wrong reality. Without love it has no positive purpose.

This accounts for something remarkable about our relationship with God. In human relations love and fear are mutually exclusive. The more I am afraid of someone, the less I love him, and the more love I feel toward someone the less I fear him. Yet we are commanded to love God with our entire heart and soul as we recite daily in the *Shema* prayer and we are also commanded to fear him as Moses declares, *and now Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear the Lord your God* (Deut. 10:12). Why isn't this a contradiction?

The answer is simple:

The fear of God determines the parameters of reality, but the love of God is the path to the sublime.



The Blessing of Desolation

And I will lay waste the land, and your enemies who dwell in it will be wretched.
(26:32)

The verses of rebuke in prophecy in its most frightening form. Each verse, each phrase, each word is a harbinger of future calamity in different times in Jewish history. For instance, the Ramban writes that “Hashem will send you back to Egypt in boats” refers to the enslavement of the Jews under the Roman emperor Titus. He also writes that “the king you appoint for yourself” refers to Agrippa who was a cruel and incompetent monarch.

In the midst of this litany of misery, we find the statement, “And I will lay waste the land, and your enemies who dwell in it will be wretched.” What does this mean? The Ramban sees it as a blessing slipped in among the curses, a word of consolation in middle of the rebuke. It is an assurance to the Jewish people that even when they are in exile the Holy Land will not be hospitable to other peoples who seek to settle there. This, concludes the Ramban, is a great proof of Divine providence, since “no other land throughout the world is as good and fertile” as the



Bechukotai (Leviticus 26:3-27:34) *advanced compendium*

Holy Land once was, and now it has lain desolate for many centuries.

Think about what the Ramban is saying. For the last two thousand years, Eretz Yisrael, that land flowing with milk and honey, has been under foreign dominion¾Romans, Persians, Arabs, Turks, British¾and what became of it? A dusty, arid wasteland sparsely populated by hardscrabble tillers of the soil. As the Torah assured us, no vibrant communities arose on the land during our absence, no deep-rooted prosperous cities.

Imagine if the Indians tried to reclaim Manhattan Island. “We want to renegotiate,” they say. “We sold this island to you for \$24 worth of wampum. We will reimburse your purchase price and give you a 100 percent return ¾ \$48. And all in cash. You don’t have to take any wampum . . . Not enough? We understand. Inflation really eats up the dollars over three hundred and fifty years. And then there is what you could have earned in mutual funds all these years. All right, fair enough. How about 48,000? Forty-eight million? Forty-eight billion? Still no sale? Ugh!”

Manhattan Island is just about priceless.

Well, imagine if the gentile settlers had been able to develop Eretz Yisrael over the last two millennia. Imagine if in the 20th century it was like one long Manhattan Island. Would it have been possible for the Jewish people to recover this real estate for a national homeland? It was only the blessing of “your enemies who dwell in it will be wretched” that has made it possible for us to recover the land.

I have always been mystified by the placement of oil reserves in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has oil, as do Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrein, Aden, Yemen and even Egypt to a certain extent. But from Eretz Yisrael, we cannot squeeze a drop of oil¾petroleum, that is. But look at the other side. If Eretz Yisrael had been oil rich, would we have been able to recover it from the gentiles? Not a chance. Once again, the blessing of desolation preserved the land for our people.

If we open our eyes, we see clearly the Divine providence by which Hashem has guided and continues to guide all the Jewish people.

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