

Parashat Bechukotai בְּחֻקֹתַי

Torah: Leviticus 26:3–27:34

Haftarah: Jeremiah 16:19–17:14

The Blessings and Curses

General Overview

The last *parasha* in Leviticus is a unique one so far in this commentary, but it is not unique to the Torah. There is a longer, better known passage near the end of Deuteronomy of similar content.

Exposition

There are three distinct parts in *Parashat Bechukotai*: parts I and II are both in chapter 26. They are the blessings and the curses. Part III is chapter 27. It consists of more teaching covering redemption of property and tithing. The majority of this study will be spent examining the blessings and the curses. We will conclude our studies in Leviticus with some comments on chapter 27. The outline is as follows:

- I. The Blessings and Curses — Introduction
- II. The Blessings 26:1–13
- III. The Curses
- IV. Vows, Dedications, and Tithes

In this excerpt from Parashat Bechukotai, we will look at some sections from both the blessings and curses.

I. The Blessings and Curses — Introduction

There is an important question that the sages have asked concerning these blessings and curses:

Why do the rewards promised to the righteous by the Torah always consist of material things, while the true spiritual objective of the perfection of the soul and its reward in the world to come are never mentioned?¹

A. Rewarding a Precept by a Precept

There are several possible ways of answering this question, which has perplexed the sages for centuries. First, Maimonides suggests that the blessings are given to us not as a reward, but as an aid to follow the commandments. He says,

The Almighty says to you: “If you perform the precepts I shall assist you to carry them out and to perfect yourself through them and remove all obstacles in your path. . . The material rewards are thus not an end in themselves but a means...But if you forsake and despise them [the commandments], I shall put obstacles in the way of your performance...” This is the implication of our sages' dictum: The reward of a precept is a precept.²

Hence, according to the Rambam, they are not really blessings or curses *per se*; rather they are helps to make it easier to do the *mitzvot*. However, we do not feel that this is the literal import of the text.

B. Too Far Above Us

Another well respected commentator, Avraham Ibn Ezra, who lived just before the Rambam, contends that God did not speak of spiritual blessings in this parasha because they are too high for the average person to fathom. Ibn Ezra writes,

I feel that the Torah was given to all, and not to an individual alone, whereas only one in a thousand can fathom the Hereafter, for it is profound.³

Ibn Ezra's answer is right, of course. Not everyone is adequately equipped to understand spiritual things. Therefore, not everyone can understand the things of God. Most people are spiritually dead (1 Corinthians 2). However, does the answer that he gives explain the text? We think not.

C. The Covenant

Many commentators fail to understand what is going on in this chapter because they do not understand the nature of its content. It is necessary to interpret the blessings and the curses in light of the covenant concept. In fact, the Lord Himself brings up the covenant issue in 26:9 when He affirms that He will continue to “keep My covenant with you” when we follow His commands.

Which covenant does the Lord have in mind? When we answer that question we will be able to unpack the meanings behind the blessings and the curses.

1. Covenant with Abraham

Thus far in the Torah there have been two covenants that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants. The first was with our father Abraham. This covenant was established in Genesis 12, 15, and 17. It is often referred to as the covenant of promise. In it God made several promises to the children of Israel, among which was the promise of a specific piece of real estate, called today the Land of Israel. These promises were grace promises in that the recipients did not deserve them nor did they earn them. Moreover, they were to be received by faith. As it is written, “And Abraham believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

Therefore, believing God’s words of promise was tantamount to believing God Himself. This seems evident from the fact that up to that time, in chapter 15, Abraham attempted to “help” God fulfill His promises. That is, instead of waiting for the promises to be fulfilled through Sarah, his wife who was beyond the age to bear children, Abraham attempted to fulfill the covenant through other avenues. For example, in 15:2–3 Abraham offers his servant Eliezar of Damascus as an heir to the promises, instead of trusting God to fulfill them through his wife Sarah. In reality, God was growing Abraham to the point of realizing that he could not fulfill the promises. They were, after all, promises that God made and therefore, only God could fulfill them. Abraham was to merely trust God to do so.

Finally Abraham reached that point of understanding, as 15:4–6 indicates. His understanding resulted in true faith — taking God at His Word. Because of his trusting God’s Word, Abraham was declared to be spiritually righteous.

2. Covenant of Sinai

The second covenant God made with the children of Israel was a completely different one, although tied in closely and connected to the covenant of promise. This was the covenant established at Mount Sinai, beginning in Exodus 19, of which the words in Leviticus 26 are a part.

Whereas the covenant with Abraham was a covenant of promise to be received by faith, the covenant at Mount Sinai was a covenant of obedience designed to enable Israel to enjoy the blessings promised to them and bear fruit in them. The content of material which was/is to be obeyed was/is the Torah.

To be sure, there are definite spiritual blessings involved. For example, what a wonderful spiritual blessing it is to have the Shekinah, (the manifested glorious presence of God dwelling among His people, such as in the Holy of Holies in the Mishkan) dwelling among us! However, this does not have to do with life in the world to come. The Shekinah was intended to be a blessing, enhancing the appreciation of and enjoyment of the privilege of living in the land of promise.

D. More Revelation Needed

There is one more piece to the puzzle. The sages were groping to find some mention of spiritual blessings in Leviticus 26 because, quite naturally, they know that spiritual blessings are the only ones which meet man’s deepest needs. However, they were looking in the wrong place. They were trying to turn the material into the spiritual in their interpretation of Leviticus 26.

The reason that there are so few spiritual blessings or curses in this chapter is because of the nature of the covenant in which they are cast. There does not need to be! The conditions of the covenant at Sinai call for obedience in order to enjoy life in the Land of Promise. They do not speak of attainment of life in the world to come. They are completely worldly oriented because they are part of the covenant that has to do with life in the Promised Land, not life in the hereafter.

The more complete elucidation of how man’s spiritual needs can be fulfilled is found in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures, although there are many places in the Tanakh in which one could have looked (such as in Psalm 23, Isaiah 53, and Jeremiah 31, just to name a few).

Hence, we see the other side of God’s revelatory coin being exposed here. The first part says, “We cannot interpret the Renewed Covenant properly without the Tanakh.” We have been emphasizing this all along in our Torah commentary, but the other side of the coin says, “We cannot fully understand the Tanakh without the Renewed Covenant.” Both are indispensable for a proper interpretation of the whole Bible.

One of the best illustrations of this idea is right here in our present parasha. If we leave out the description of man’s spiritual needs and the subsequent spiritual blessings found in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures, we will fall into the trap — as did our sages who, for the most part, rejected the revelation in the Renewed

Covenant — of misinterpreting the material blessings and curses and attempting to make them into something which they were not intended to be.

III. The Curses

We come now to the bulk of chapter 26, commonly called “The Curses.” We need to say a few words of introduction before we examine some of these curses. We need to clear up a grave misunderstanding among many believers in Yeshua.

It has been taught in some circles that Israel has experienced these curses (as well as the ones in Deuteronomy) because they rejected Yeshua as the Messiah. Several points are in order in response to this.

First, these curses and blessings were given over 1,400 or so years before Yeshua came. During those hundreds of years, Israel experienced many of the curses outlined in this chapter. For example, one of these curses was the promise of dispersion of the Jewish people from the Promised Land to live among the many nations of the world. This dispersion began to take place at the hands of the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V and Sargon II around the year 722 BCE, when the northern ten tribes living in Samaria were taken captive and dispersed throughout the Assyrian empire. Then came the Babylonians in 586 BCE, who exiled the people of Judah and the refugees of Israel that lived amidst the people of Judah and Benjamin. During the Persian period, most of the children of Jacob did not return to the Promised Land. That continued throughout the Greek period as well.

When the Romans arrived in 63 BCE, most of the Jewish people already lived outside of the Promised Land. All of this was even before Yeshua had come. By the time of the late Second Temple period, there were major Jewish populations in most of the important cities of the Roman Empire and other population centers in the ancient Near East.

The second point is just as important. The text in Leviticus tells us that the condition for both blessing and cursing is how Israel responded to the Torah, not whether they would accept or reject Messiah. The Torah was the covenant whereby they would enjoy the blessing given to Abraham and experience fruitfulness in them. By rejecting the Torah given in writing to Moshe, the Israelites would incur all that the Torah says would happen to them in breaking the covenant. The real issue here is the Torah, not Israel’s reaction to Yeshua.

As a side note, it can easily be pointed out that there were huge numbers of Jewish people who *did* accept Yeshua as the Messiah. In fact, the Greek of Acts 21:20 indicates that when Paul arrived back in Jerusalem, sometime in the early 60’s CE, there were in Jerusalem alone “tens of thousands” of Jewish believers who believed in Yeshua (and who also, by the way, were Torah observant — including Paul!) That is no small number. There were even more Jewish believers living in Galilee and scattered all throughout the Roman Empire!

Moreover, it was Israel that was responsible for taking the Good News of Yeshua to the far ends of the ancient known world. Yeshua commissioned and sent out His apostles (representatives –*shliachim*, שלחים), bearing the testimony of His saving grace. They were faithful, even to the point of martyrdom, in taking the Good News to the gentiles.

Therefore we cannot say that Israel blew it! We cannot say that Israel did not do what God called them to do. What we can say, however, is that the religious and political leadership of the nation was unfaithful to the Messiah's first appearance. We can also say that the majority of Israel did not accept Yeshua. However, we must be quick to point out that there always has been — even before Yeshua came — a remnant chosen by grace.

This second point has grave implications for the modern state of Israel, especially for that “remnant chosen by grace,” the Messianic Jews. If Israel was chastised by the Lord for its unfaithfulness to the covenant, as it is expressed in the Torah, then what about the condition of the Jewish people today, especially Israel's remnant, the Jewish believers in Yeshua?

It is not just good — it is *essential* for Jewish people to believe in the Messiah Yeshua. It is wonderful that more and more of us are trusting in Him daily but that does not relieve us of our responsibility toward the covenant (Leviticus 26). As we have stated many times before in this commentary, we are to live according to the Torah not for the purpose of earning, meriting, or keeping our salvation accomplished by Yeshua, but as an expression of who we are in Him and as children of Israel. Nowhere does the Bible teach us that this covenant made at Mount Sinai has been annulled — modified yes — but not annulled. The consequences for keeping or not keeping Torah are still in force.

¹ Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra*, 318.

² Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 577.

³ *Ibid.*, 573.