

Parashat Behukotai: Bathing in a Pool of Blessing

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Dear Friends,

The blessings of Parashat Behukotai are beautiful! But the curses in it are terrible. The blessings and curses are separated by the **IF** word. **IF** you follow my commandments you will be blessed. **IF, HOWEVER, YOU DON'T**, you will be cursed.

Unfortunately, no list of rules which must be obeyed in order to be worthy of blessings is mentioned, so anyone looking for a precise recipe to ensure blessedness will not find it here.

Because this is the closing parasha of Vayikra, which is also called "Torat HaCohanim" – the holy mediators between Bnei Yisrael and the source of all blessings – perhaps the rules to be obeyed are the many laws mentioned in Vayikra: sacrifices, purity, skin conditions, and particularly "Love your neighbor as yourself".

Yet, a more likely option, albeit surprising, are the laws of Shmitta and Yovel, mentioned in the previous parasha. Behukotai actually says so quite clearly: The ultimate curse is exile, as only exile, says the Parasha, will grant the land the rest that was denied it all these years:

"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 while you were dwelling upon it." (Vayikra 26: 34-35)

Indeed, according to Behukotai, it seems that the essence of the entire Torah that Moshe received on Mount Sinai is the Shmitta!

But why? Of all the laws of the Torah, why is observing the Shmitta the most rewarding? Why is disregarding the Shmitta the most painful? Isn't "Thou shalt not murder", "Thou shalt not steal", "Thou shalt not commit adultery" much more important than the Shmitta?

Furthermore, how can our relation to the earth take precedence over our relationship with our fellow human beings?

Even though Shmitta - which occurs on the seventh year - was never mentioned until last week's parasha, it is based on the concept of Shabbat, the weekly Shmitta, which is one of the oldest commandments in the Torah.

Every Friday night we sing "Lecha Dodi" with gusto. The second verse of the song reads: **"Let us go forth, to greet the Shabbat, for it is the source of THE blessing."**

Indeed, the Shabbat is considered the source of blessing! And blessings are what our parasha – Behukotai – is all about.

But why is Shabbat (and by association, the Shmitta) the source of blessing? Why does abundance flow from them? Why do they take precedence over not murdering, stealing, or committing adultery; even over loving your neighbor as yourself?

Perhaps the reason is that good rest energizes us and helps us go out into the world - work hard, earn a living - thus bring abundance and blessing. There are those who would go so far as to say that a good night's sleep and an afternoon nap would make the world a much better place! We all know how much stress and distress are caused by lack of sleep and rest.

Yet, another, deeper reason for Shabbat and Shmitta being a source of blessing is the idea that everything in our world comes from the "Einsof" (Infinite potential). Everything that IS – all the abundance – moves from infinite potential to finite realization. The Sabbath represents the Infinite, the source of all blessings. It is called "M'Ein Olam Habbah" - a taste of the Divine realm.

Halacha - Jewish law - throughout the ages has tried to formulate the way in which abundance can be obtained from the source of blessing. Human nature is such that people often need to be given detailed instructions. Some claim that today we are less in need of such "obsessive" observances to ensure connection with the source, and that it is enough to have a good meditation session (for example) in order to draw the abundance to us. Possibly. This may be a matter of opinion or of character.

In the quote above, from the hymn Lecha Dodi, the Sabbath is referred to as ***Makor Habracha*** - the source of blessing. Makor means source (Mekori, in modern Hebrew, is someone who is original, who draws directly from the source). Bracha - blessing - is spelled the same way as "breicha", a pool of water. Hence, the Sabbath is a well spring - a source - of living water. Shabbat gives life to the week that follows.

Parashat Behukotai suggests that it is necessary for us to let go and abstain from all work, thereby connecting to the SOURCE of blessing and abundance, the actual spring from which abundance flows. This abstention is not a technical issue. It is one of awareness, consciousness.

Both Shmitta and Shabbat consciousness are the recognition that WE ARE NOT the source, and that we need to align - and re-align repeatedly - with the source in order to ensure the flow of abundance, of life, in our lives.

The gemarrah tells us:

"Once dawn arrived, the Sages of Israel entered to advise him (King David) with regard to the various concerns of the nation and the economy. They said to him: 'Our master, the king, your nation requires sustenance.' He said: 'Go and sustain one another, provide each other with whatever is lacking.'

"The Sages of Israel responded to him with a parable: A single handful of food does not satisfy a lion, and a pit will not be filled merely from the rain that falls directly into its mouth, but other water must be piped in (ge'onim). So too, the nation cannot sustain itself using its own resources."

(Tractate Brachot 3b: <https://www.sefaria.org.il/Berakhot.3b.29?lang=en>)

A waterhole cannot fill up only from the rainwater that falls directly over it, it requires additional water to flow into it. In the same manner, a pit that was dug up cannot be filled back again using only its own soil (try it, it's strangely true)!

The Service of the Heart

Throughout the length, breadth, and depth of the Torah there is a very clear message (which is no longer heard) that we cannot really claim ownership over anything. When we do - when we view them as ours, as coming from us - the channels of abundance and blessing become blocked and curses abound. When we remember and acknowledge that every finite **thing** comes from the Einsof (the Infinite), the channels of abundance open wide.

This notion may seem impossible and even counterintuitive. It goes against everything we have ever been taught. For example, we Israelis are obsessed with having to buy a house, at all costs. Renting is scoffed at. It is tolerated as a temporary arrangement at best. We need to own our tiny piece of property, our home, even if it means mortgaging our lives to the bank and breaking our backs for years to pay it off. We Israelis, have to have real-estate! Without it, our life feels ungrounded and shaky. It may be our Jewish post-traumatic stress disorder, but it is stunning how contrary it is to the spirit of the Torah.

So here we are, about to bid farewell to Vayikra, to move on to Bamidbar, while in reality, we have not learned the lessons, have not yet implemented the most important calling of the book we are about to finish this Shabbat!

This coming Shavuot, it will be three thousand, three hundred and thirty five years since the revelation at Mount Sinai. That is a very long time to fail the most essential lesson of the Torah.

To be very honest... I myself don't even know where to begin.

Perhaps this is why we are "doomed" to read this Parasha over and over again, year after year... we will get it one day!

For now, being radically grateful for everything we “have”, is a reasonably good start.

Farewell, Vayikra, and thank you for your insights. Welcome, Bamidbar, thank you in advance for your blessings.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha