



The Conservative Kehila in Zichron Ya'acov

Parashat B'chukotai: The Letter Yod Spells Happiness

Dear Friends,

Parashat B'chukotai (lit. "My laws") is the last parasha in Vayikra - a difficult book, but a meaningful and formative one. The book begins with the blood of sacrifices which, I admit, I am just beginning to understand. It ends with the laws of Shmitta, which are perhaps the spiritual peak of the entire Torah.

The Parasha begins with the ultimate fantasy we all have - only some are aware of it and some aren't - **"If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant you rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit."** (Vayikra 26:3-4)

We ALL search for the golden formula, THE laws of life, or THE ultimate path, which will guarantee us a life of blessings - rains in their season and abundance.

But what are these laws? What will bring us fulfillment? What will give us abundance and ease?

When children are young, their parents make decisions for them, hoping to give them the best a parent can provide: the best place to deliver them, the most loving and supportive kindergarten, the ideal education system, the healthiest food, a system of rewards and boundaries. Parent fret over how best to guide and advise their children while accommodating their own unique qualities. Later on, each person makes his or her own choices - national service, a meaningful pre-army program, military service, the ideal post-army trip, what to study (for the soul or for the bank account - can both be achieved?), whom to marry, where to live, career choices and how they can be harmonized with family obligations, huge dilemmas in child-rearing, overcoming marital crises, sometimes dissolving it (the marriage, that is) - and doing that right too - choosing a second career, a third, etc.

We arrived in this complex world without an operating manual. We turn to experts, to coaches. We read guide books, consult rabbis, mystics, spiritual teachers. We inhale internet articles... How on earth should one live? What are the rules, the laws of a life worth living?

What will guarantee us rain at the right time and an abundant harvest?

If the answers are to be found in our parasha, what then are “My-laws” exactly, referred to in the opening sentence? Are they the 613 mitzvot of the Torah - the 248 positive commandments and the 365 negative ones? And if so, will these guarantee fulfillment and abundance?

And, if we obey all of them “successfully” and are indeed blessed with rain and economic abundance, will that bring us the longed-for happiness and the joy we so badly seek?

I don't know! I really don't!

“Chok”, in Hebrew, means law. “Chukot” is the plural of “Chuka”, which means constitution. “Chukotai” means “my many constitutions”, indicating that there is more than one constitution. Now this is odd! A constitution is made up of many laws, but can a country or a society obey two or more constitutions?

When we study the writings of Our Sages - the Mishna, the Gemarrah, the Midrash, and the Agaddah - we encounter a great abundance of paths, methods, and laws. Mostly, we encounter many contradictions. The editors of the Talmud (which is the Mishna and Gemarrah together) very wisely ensured that all opinions are documented and stay in the corpus - those which became laws and those that were rejected.

Furthermore, in an extremely daring move, the Sages announced that even the minority opinion, the one which were not accepted as law, is nevertheless also considered “the words of the living God”.

The best known debate which attests to this is in the Gemarrah, in Masechet Eiruvim, page 13B: **“For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.”**

The halacha - the laws and behaviors which form a just society - is determined by the opinions of Beit Hillel, but the true, Divine constitution? Not at all!

This is why there have always been different streams in Judaism. There was never one Jewish way. Never! Here are a few famous, though not exhaustive examples: the Pharisees vs the Sadducees, the zealots vs the tolerant, Beit Hillel vs Beit Shammai, the rabbis of Babylonia vs the rabbis of Eretz Yisrael, the Litvaks vs the Chassids, the Sephardim vs the Ashkenazim, and of course, the streams of modern Judaism. Jewish civilization is in its essence a pluralistic and varied one, because from God spring infinite constitutions.

The Mishna in Masechet Avot (Sayings of the Fathers) instructs us to “find yourself a rabbi”, meaning choose YOUR path in life and dedicate yourself to it.

While there is always an attempt being made to create a common law for humans to all get along, there is no one Divine constitution or Chuka! The Creator is infinite, and so are His paths. The opinions of Beit Hillel which determine the Halacha are usually the more moderate ones, but those of Beit Shammai are also Divine. They simply didn't best suit the reality of life at a certain point in time. Perhaps their time will come. There are even those who say that this will happen when the Messiah comes - when reality changes entirely!

But... If everything is true and it is all God's living words, how are we to choose? What is the path that will bring us the blessings of rain and abundance?

Again, I don't know!

And yet I would like to suggest a direction...

I would like to suggest that the answer may lie in the letter “yod”, which is the last in the parasha's name, Bechukotai (בְּחֻקֹּתַי). This yod hints that there is a direction, like the hand of a compass. The nature and the beauty of a compass is that it sets the direction of a goal which cannot be attained. Just as “North” can never be reached, so too, the Divine is actually a direction and not an attainable destination. When we seek out our unique way through the thick of the forest, AKA our life, we may hear a rich internal dialog raging within us: what is the shortest path, the easiest, the most beneficial, the safest, most secure, most comfortable, most fun, most enriching, meaningful, etc. Each voice determines a path of choice - one of ease, one geared towards achievements and accomplishments, one that seeks power, one that is safe and protected, etc.

The results in our life will usually tell us a thing or two about the choices we made (consciously and unconsciously).

The invitation offered in Parashat B'chukotai, is to seek a Divine path - one that is elevated, deep, and profoundly appropriate for us - **regardless of specific outcomes**. Timely rain and abundant harvest are not a specific result. They are experiences and feelings. There is no mention of how much rain, how big a harvest. Rather, the goal is an internal sense of blessing and abundance.

How do we know what the Divine path is?

We don't! Because all paths are "the words of the living God." God is one, but God's paths are infinite. Every person will have a different path. Finding one's path may be the most difficult thing he or she will do, but also the most important. It requires deep spiritual work, precisely because we did not receive a life-instruction manual at birth.

The results of our choices are not meant to be quantified (as we see from the mention of the rain and the harvest) but experienced. Hence, they can never be compared to others'. Our fulfillment and abundance may be objectively small, but subjectively very great, and mostly, fulfilling.

May we indeed ask the Divine questions. And may we all meet one another on the infinite paths of the forest. May we learn together and from one another. May we be accepting and respectful of each path, even when it is different from our own, and at the same time, be loyal to the one we chose, and may we be gentle, soft, and humble in our search.

Next week we begin a new book, Bamidbar - In the Wilderness. Like the forest, there are no set paths in the Wilderness. So... prepare your compass - is the hand pointing towards "G"?

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha