

PARASHAH: B'chukkotai (By my regulations)
ADDRESS: Vayikra (Leviticus) 26:3-27:34
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

We have finally come to the last portion of Vayikra, known as **Parashat B'chukkotai** (say “b-choo-koh-tie;” the “ch” is as the “ch” in Bach). The root word from which our Torah portion's title is taken is “choke” צק, and it means “statute, ordinance, limit, something prescribed.”¹ This should not be confused with its counterpart “Torah” which is also sometimes translated along these same lines. I understand the word choke to convey something a bit more “wooden” (edict) when compared to Torah (teaching). Because this commentary's teachings are so pertinent to world Jewry, both past and present, I shall be making many more rabbinic quotes than I normally do. I will ask my non-Jewish audience to bear with me as I reach out to my fellow “Y'hudim” (Jews) through the instructions of the Chazal (Sages of Blessed Memory).

This week's Torah teaching introduces one of the central aspects of the covenant made through Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses our teacher): obedience. The Torah clearly teaches here in this parashah that blessing is predicated upon obedience to its chukkim (edicts). What sort of blessing? Physical, social, and financial, to name a few.

But not spiritual.

First the “Bad News...”

¹ Brown, Driver, Briggs (BDB), צק

The LORD's reproof to 'Am Yisra'el, found in chapter 26:14-45, is known in Judaism as the "Tochacha," a "minor" listing of "curses" brought against the People for their disobedience. A similar yet "major" listing, also referred to as "Tochacha," can be read in **Parashat Ki Tavo** at D'varim (Deuteronomy) chapter 28.

According to one online Hebrew-English dictionary, the origin word 'tocheycha' conveys a "reprimand."² Browns, Driver, Briggs defines this word as "rebuke, correction, reproof, punishment, chastisement."³ By its context, since the source is the Holy One Himself, it conveys the purpose of "divine retribution." Interesting by comparison, the Hebrew of this current perek (chapter) is written in the plural, addressing collective Isra'el. Its counterpart in D'varim 28, however, is written in the singular. The Gaon of Vilna explains that the difference conveyed by the listing in D'varim is that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, is addressing collective Isra'el, that is, each and every Jew that was present then and each and every Jew that will be born in the future. Indeed a quote from the JPS version of **Parashat Nitzavim** (D'varim 29:13, 14 [14, 15 in English Bibles]) gives the Gaon this impression:

29:13 But it is not with you alone that I am making this covenant and this dread oath.

וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנֹכִי כֹרֵת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הָאֲלֹהִים הַזֹּאת

(V'lo itchem l'vadechem anochi koret et-hab'rit hazot ve'et-ha'alah hazot.)

29:14 I am making it both with those who are standing here with us today before God our Lord, and with those who are not [yet] here with us today.

כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁנוּ פֹה עַמְּנוּ עִמָּד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה עַמְּנוּ הַיּוֹם

(Ki et-asher yeshno poh imanu omed hayom lifney Adonai Eloheynu ve'et asher eynenu poh imanu hayom.)

Rashi explains that the phrase "*v'lo itchem l'vadchem*" וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם includes even "dorot ho'asidim l'hiyot" - generations that are destined to yet come into existence. Indeed, the Gemara (the commentary on the Mishnah) explains that the principal of communal responsibility - *kol Yisroel areivim zeh*

² <http://milon.morfix.co.il/Default.aspx>, תוכחה

³ Brown, Driver, Briggs (BDB), תוכחה

bozeh - is rooted in Parashat Nitzavim⁴. Thus, the collective nature of the Tochacha in particular, and K'nesset Yisra'el (Assembly of Isra'el) in general, includes any future member of B'nei Yisra'el (Sons of Isra'el) as well. Accordingly, the Gemara derives the concept of arvus (say "ar-voos"), "joint responsibility [of one Jew for another's performance of mitzvot]," from the tochacha, which emphasizes the collective unit of B'nei Yisra'el. In this sense, Rav Yeruchum Perlow explains the view of the Bahag who counts the Tochacha and its blessings and curses among the 613 mitzvot. He suggests that the Bahag was not referring to the ceremony and ritual of the Tochacha, but rather to the mitzvah of arvus, which is rooted in the Tochacha itself.⁵

Not Spiritual?

Our deceased Torah teacher Nechama Leibowitz (zt"l) helps us to see that the Rabbis of antiquity also wrestled with this passage. Before tackling the issue of why spiritual reward is not listed with the blessings of this chapter, we first notice the arrangement of the two main features.

Leibowitz comments (in her *Gilyonot* to **Parashat B'chukkotai**):

Our Parashah thus reflects the principle, which our sages discerned throughout Scriptures, whereby the measure of Divine Goodness outweighs that of Divine retribution (cf. Yoma 76a).

There is likewise an asymmetry between the prerequisites of the blessings and those of the curses.

Before the blessing the Torah states:

If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments and do them
26:3

Before the curses the Torah states:

But if you will not hearken to Me, and will not do all these command.
26:14

And if you shall despise, or if your soul abhor My judgments, so that you will not do all My commandments, but that you break My Covenant. 26:15

The standards applied to the blessings evidently differ from those relating to the curses.

⁴ *Sanhedrin* 43b and *Sotah* 36b.

⁵ *Sefer HaMitzvot L'Rasag*, Chapter 57.

Thus, the curses are not to be administered upon the mere transgression of the laws; only upon despising and abhorring them, as noted by Seforno:

If you shall despise My statutes – beyond mere violation, you will despise them;

And if your soul loathe My judgments—consciously...i.e., loathe them as one might willfully spew out something objectionable...

Thus the preconditions of the blessings radically differ from those of the curses.⁶

She continues by listing the opinions of various sages:

But the blessings as such (26:1-13) give rise to a different and more complex question, variously posed by our commentators:

R. Yosef Albo, in his *Sefer Halkkarim* 39,4:
Jewish authorities throughout the ages have never ceased puzzling why the Torah omits to specify any spiritual benefits alongside the material gains that it lists. Moreover, since the Torah does not mention the spiritual benefits which constitute the principal reward, why does it elaborate the material benefits which are not the main reward?

R. Yizhak Arama, in *Akedat Yithak, Behukotai*:
Adherents of religion who believe in Divine reward and punishment (for those who please or anger God, respectively), assail the Torah's silence concerning the spiritual remuneration that constitutes the chief aim of the Torah, which holds up transitory, material rewards, as the goal of those obedient to its laws.

R. Yitzhak Abarvanel, *Behukotai* 26:
Why does the Torah confine its goals and rewards to material things, as mentioned in his comment, and omit spiritual perfection and the reward of the soul after death – the true and ultimate goal of man? Our enemies exploit this text and charge Israel with denying the principle of the soul's judgment in the afterlife.⁷

These are very important questions, which need answering, if we are to understand one of the primary purposes for the giving and doing of the Torah. Before I give my opinions as a Torah Teacher I want to share the opinions of one of the greatest sages of Isra'el's past, Rabbi Moshe ben-Maimon (Maimonides, a.k.a., RaMBaM). The *Mishneh Torah*, a code of Jewish law, was compiled

⁶ <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/torani/nehama/behukota.html>

⁷ *Ibid.*

between 1170 and 1180, while the RaMBaM was living in Egypt, and is regarded as Maimonides' magnum opus. The work consists of fourteen books, which subdivide into sections, chapters and paragraphs. To this day it is the only post-Talmudic work that details all of Jewish observance, including those laws which are only applicable when the Holy Temple is in place.⁸ Dealing with the "laws of repentance, viz, teshuvah" in book one of his Mishneh Torah he comments on this perplexing issue of the Torah:

Once it is known that a reward is given for fulfilling commandments and that the goodness which we will receive if we follow the way of God as mentioned in the Torah is life in the World to Come, as it is written, "...that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your life," and that the revenge which shall be unleashed upon the wicked people who disregarded the righteous mannerisms as mentioned in the Torah is excision, as it is written, "...that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him" - then what is it that is written in throughout the Torah, that if one listens, one will receive such-and-such, and that if one doesn't listen such- and-such will happen to one, as well as all earthly matters such as plenty, famine, war, peace, monarchy, humility, living in Israel, exile, success, misfortune and other covenantal matters? All these matters were true and always will be. Whenever we fulfill the commandments of the Torah we will receive all good earthly matters, and whenever we transgress them, all the mentioned evils will befall us. Nevertheless, the goodness is not all that the reward for fulfilling commandments consists of, and the evils are not the entire punishment received by transgressors.

This is how all matters are decided: The Holy One, Blessed Be He, gave us this Torah, which is a support of life, and anybody who does what is written in it and knows that everything contained in it is complete and correct, will merit life in the World To Come. He will merit [a portion] in proportion to the magnitude of his actions and to the extent of his knowledge. The Torah assures us that if we fulfill it with joy and pleasure and always act according to it, then all things such as illness, war, famine, et cetera, which could prevent us from doing so will be removed, and all things such as plenty, peace, richness, et cetera, which will aid us in fulfilling the Torah will be influenced to come our way so that we will not have to occupy ourselves all day in [obtaining] bodily needs, but that we will be free to sit all day, learn and gather knowledge and fulfill commandments, in order to merit life in the World To Come. In this vein it is written in the Torah after the assurance of goodness in this world, "And it shall be accounted virtue in us, if we take care to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as He has commanded us."⁹

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mishne_Torah

⁹ <http://www.panix.com/~jjbaker/MadaT.html>

Obviously as a Messianic Jew I disagree with his implied conclusions for keeping Torah. Don't get me wrong. Maimonides was a great man and a far more scholarly Torah teacher than I. But the Spirit of the Holy One reveals to all who earnestly seek the Truth (and find it in Yeshua) that keeping the Commandments for the sake of forensic righteousness amounts to legalism. I do NOT espouse to legalism. On the contrary, I firmly believe that forensic righteousness is only obtainable by placing one's unreserved trusting faithfulness in the sinless atonement provided by Yeshua HaMashiach! I stand by my own conclusions, based on an understanding of the writing of the Apostolic Writings (New Testament):

The Torah is not teaching its adherents to follow it in pursuit of spiritual well-being, that is, eternal life. The Torah is simply NOT a salvific document (pertaining to salvation). HaShem clearly outlines step-by-step what will happen when and if the House of Isra'el follows his laws. He also clearly outlines the consequences of disobedience. History has proven that 'Am Yisra'el failed to heed HaShem's dire warning of punishment, and indeed sunk to the absolute depravity of even consuming their own offspring from fear and want of food (read Lev. 26:27-29)!

What Exactly is the Problem?

Is Judaism guilty of turning the Torah into a legalistic document? Most ancient Isra'elites—particularly the 1st century set—felt that merely by being born into Jewish lineage afforded them a place in the World to Come. For the Gentile not born of Jewish stock, this place could be secured by becoming a Jew, something possible by undergoing the ritual of the proselyte (read my commentary to Galatians for more information). I do not espouse to any such “ethnocentric Jewish exclusivism.”

Some in Judaism today are guilty of making the Torah a “works-based” teaching; many in the Church are also guilty of misunderstanding Torah. To be sure, many Christians have swallowed the hellish lie that the Torah has been done away with the coming of Yeshua. I am amazed at both opinions! Where does the misunderstanding that the Torah is a document of legalism and not grace stem from? It stems from a human misunderstanding of the purposes and calling of HaShem. Let us uncover a safe “middle ground” of understanding between these the poles called legalism and lawlessness. When an individual misappropriates the true intent of the gracious teachings of the Torah, he is a prime target for the misguided heresy called legalism!

Shomer Mitzvot (שומר מצוות)

It is here that I want to address the complimentary features between the Covenant made with Avraham, and the Covenant made with Moshe. Some of my material will be drawn from the excellent teaching provided by [First Fruits of](#)

[Zion Publications](#) book 'Torah Rediscovered', which can be purchased through their website of the same name.

The Hebrew word שׁוֹמֵר "shomer" means "keeper of," or "to be observant;" in the Qal stem, the root word שָׁמַר "shamar" suggests the idea of "safeguarding."¹⁰ The Hebrew word מִצְוֹת "mitzvot" is the plural form of the word מִצְוָה "mitzvah," meaning, "command;" thus, שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹת "shomer mitzvot" (say: show-mair meets-vote) means "keeper of the commands," " or more generically "Torah observant."

Many believers—specifically Jewish believers without a formal background in Judaism, and Gentile ones who wish to identify with the Scriptures of Israel—have questions about what it means to be "Torah observant." Pursuing the Torah as the Master, Yeshua HaMashiach (Jesus Christ) modeled it for his followers is sometimes referred to as הלֶכְהָ "halakhah," coming from the Hebrew word הֵלֵךְ "halakh" for "walk."¹¹

In Judaism, safeguarding and keeping the Torah is central to performing the will of HaShem.¹² Indeed, as properly understood from HaShem's point of view, the whole of Torah was given to bring its followers to the "goal" of acquiring the kind of faith in HaShem that leads to placing one's trusting faithfulness in the One and only Son of HaShem, Yeshua HaMashiach.¹³ To this end, the Torah has prophesied about him since as early as the book of Genesis (3:15), and continues to speak of him until its conclusion in Revelation (22:20). In this capacity, the Torah תּוֹרָה acts like its etymological counterpart יָרָה "yarah"¹⁴ (an archery term) in that it "teaches" its adherents how to properly identify with HaShem by helping them to "reach the mark." To be sure, one of the most common Hebrew verbs used to identify "sin" חָטָא "chatah" literally means, "to miss the mark."¹⁵

Obedience to the Torah has long since been an oft-misunderstood subject, both in the Jewish community and the Christian one. To be sure, in the 1st century Judaisms, the prevailing theology sincerely—albeit incorrectly—believed that genuine and lasting covenant status was granted to Israel and Israel alone. Tim Hegg captures this concept well in his book *The Letter Writer*.

If the extant Rabbinic literature contains at least some expression of the general viewpoints of 1st Century Pharisaism, then it is safe to say that the

¹⁰ Brown, Driver, Briggs (BDB), שׁוֹמֵר.

¹¹ Ibid, הֵלֵךְ.

¹² Deuteronomy 5:1.

¹³ Luke 24:27, 44-47; Romans 10:4.

¹⁴ BDB, יָרָה.

¹⁵ Ibid, חָטָא.

prevailing Pharisaic view of Paul's day was that every Israelite was secured a place in the world to come.¹⁶

*All Isra'el have a portion in the world-to-come, for it is written, Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.*¹⁷

The verse referenced in the Talmud above (“for it is written”) is taken from Yesha'yahu (Isaiah) 60:21, which reads:

Thy people also shall be all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified (ASV).

However, the literal Hebrew of “Thy people also shall be all righteous” is וְעַמְּךָ כֻּלָּם צְדִיקִים “**And your people all of them [are] righteous [ones].**” The translator's insert of “shall be all” is not in the text, however the future context of the passage lends to this choice of wording, of which I agree. Nevertheless, this statement of the prophet's lead the Sages to adopt a position similar to the one listed in the Talmud, viz, Isra'el exclusively shall be righteous. In this capacity the Sages imagined that Torah does not function to lead the individual to an imputed righteousness (the way the pedagogue leads the boy-student to the Teacher of Righteousness in Galatians 3:24), rather, the Torah is given to the person who is righteous either by birth or by conversion. We shall be examining this view in subsequent commentaries to this series, particularly my “*Exegeting Galatians*” paper.

It is my understanding that the errors surrounding one's relationship to Torah can be corrected once a person resolves the issues surrounding identity and legalism, begins to understand the intended nature and function of the Torah in the first place, and then faithfully applies it to their own lives. Because the Messiah has already come, the Torah is now a document meant to be lived out in the life of a faithful follower of Yeshua, through the power of the Ruach HaKodesh, to the glory of HaShem the Father. It should not be presumed that it could be obeyed mechanically, automatically, legalistically, without having faith, without having trust in HaShem, without having love for HaShem or man, and without being empowered by the Ruach HaKodesh. To state it succinctly, Torah observance is a matter of the heart, always has been¹⁸, and always will be.

¹⁶ Tim Hegg, *The Letter Writer* (FFOZ Publications, 2002), p. 85.

¹⁷ m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1, the gemara is b. *Sanhedrin* 90a.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 6:6; 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:25-27; Romans 7:22; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16.

It is my desire that this continuing series of teachings will assist the average non-Jewish believer, or new Messianic Jewish believer in his desire to become a more mature child of God.

"And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (Deuteronomy 10:12-16, NIV).

Because the Torah is written on the hearts of all who truly name the name of Yeshua as LORD and Savior, it is meant to be followed to the best of our ability. We have no reason for fear of condemnation, or the trappings of legalism!

Our Relationship to the Covenants

The following explanation is meant to serve as a primer to the individuals' search to become "Torah Observant." It is not meant to be an exhaustive definition on the subject, rather, it is simply an introduction to a series of teachings in this area. To be sure, this Torah Teacher is not the subject matter expert. But the following "midrash" (teaching example) should enlighten the average believer: (I'm pretty sure my friends at **First Fruits of Zion** have made me familiar with the following example. I have, however, modified it somewhat.)

'Most new automobiles come with two important pieces of literature: an owner's manual, and a set of registration papers. The first of these is free with the purchase of the car. The latter needs to be obtained legally by the purchaser. 'In the event of a traffic altercation (accident, speeding, etc.), the driver of the vehicle is required to produce the proof of registration (among other things) to the police man making the report. Failure to do so will have serious repercussions on the part of the driver, as this information vitally links the driver to the ownership of the car. Obviously the registration paper is very important.

'On a similar vein, a long trip out and abroad on a hot summer day, without the use of the air conditioner, will prove to be uncomfortable, to say the least. Especially, if the region is a humid one. A flat tire during this trip would spell "double disaster." Because this is a new car, the driver is unfamiliar with the climate controls, so the heat is unbearable! Also, he or she may be ignorant when it comes to changing a flat tire! Where does the driver turn to for assistance? Fortunately the owner's manual covers such topics as "climate

controls, changing a flat, oil pressure, engine maintenance, and even radio features.” The owner’s manual proves to be a valuable tool in providing both comfort and peace of mind in this situation.’

Conclusions

The matter of Torah Observance is made clearer when one understands the relationship he or she has to the Covenants. The Torah spells out at least two very important Covenants in the life of a follower of HaShem (God). There is the **Avrahamic (with Abraham) Covenant** and the **Moshaic (with Moses) Covenant**. The Avrahamic Covenant serves to represent the registration papers, in our above drash. Prior to coming to faith, the Torah served as a reminder of sin (Romans 7:7-12). This is not the **only** function of Torah, but it is a primary one. After coming into a relationship with HaShem, through His Son Yeshua, the person underwent a change in relationship to the Torah. The Avrahamic Covenant became for him or her, a “promise of inheritance.” And what is this “inheritance?” “Eternal life,” through trusting faithfulness. It became their “**proof of ownership**” so-to-say. It still reminded him or her of their sin. However, because we now constitute the “**Righteousness of HaShem**” (Ephesians 2:1-10; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21), we are now free to pursue following HaShem without the threat of death for disobedience! To be sure, the Torah spelled certain death for some disobedient acts committed by the supposed covenant follower (see: Exodus 31:12-18 “Sabbath violation”). Even the **New Covenant** Scriptures (B’rit Chadashah) teach, “The wages (payment) of sin is death.” But now Yeshua’s atoning death has “redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13, **KJV**). “Death” and “condemnation” is no longer our wages (Romans 6:23; 8:1).

The Moshaic Covenant was added for the “enjoyment of the promise” already available through our participation in the Avrahamic Covenant. The Moshaic Covenant became our “owner’s manual,” providing blessing, maintenance, and enjoyment of promise to our lives.

“For those who trust HaShem for the promises, the proper order for faith and obedience is set by the sequence in which the covenants were given. In other words, faith must precede obedience. But the kind of faith accepted by HaShem is one, which naturally flows into obedience. True obedience never comes before faith, nor is it an addition to faith. It is always the result of true biblical faith.”¹⁹

Torah Observance is a matter of the **heart**. It always has been and always will be. The Torah Proper (first Five Books of Moshe) instructed the people of Isra’el to “love ADONAI your God with all their heart, all your being and all your resources” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This is where “*Shomer Mitzvot*” begins—by

¹⁹ Ariel and D’vorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered* (FFOZ, 1996), p. 32.

loving HaShem, and accepting Him on His terms. By this, I mean accepting His means of covenant obedience. For today, this means acceptance of Yeshua, His only Son, for Jew and non-Jew alike.

Covenants require a response on the part of the follower. HaShem, for His part, has provided the “promise of inheritance” for all those who participate in the Avrahamic Covenant. The response to this covenant is “faith.” The nature of the Mosaic Covenant is “blessing, maintenance, and enjoyment of promise.” For all who wish to participate, the response to this covenant is “obedience.” It’s that “easy.” But not so easy for the original hearers of the blessings and curses of Leviticus chapter 26! For as the history of the Torah will graphically demonstrate, an entire generation failed to understand God’s important message and is forced to die in the wilderness before even reaching the Promised Land of Inheritance (coming up in Numbers chapter 14)!

The lesson for us today is important indeed!

This idea of commandment keeping is a state of mind, as well as a daily function! We should never fall for the age-old, compulsory reasons for keeping the commands of HaShem! Legalism, that is, keeping the Torah for the sake of salvation or merit with HaShem (making yourself better than your fellow man in the eyes of HaShem), is simply NOT Scriptural! To be sure, it is a misuse of the Torah itself! Torah observance is a matter of the heart!

It is a natural action of ours, urged on and empowered by the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) within us! It is the result from having the Torah placed on our inward parts, as new creations in Messiah Yeshua! It is not something we do to BECOME saved; it is something we do BECAUSE we are saved!

It is customary after the completion of a book of the Torah to say,

“Chazak, chazak, v’nit’chazek!”
(Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened!)

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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