**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI**

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**The Measure of Good is Greater than the Measure of Punishment**

**By Rabbanit Sharon Rimon**

**I. The Covenant at Sinai**

*Parashat Bechukotai* closes the book of *Vayikra.* The *parasha* opens with the covenant that was made between God and the people of Israel: "If you walk in My statutes" (26:3), you will receive an abundance of blessings (as they are described in vv. 4-13). "But if you will not hearken to Me" (vv. 14-15), you will be visited with curses (as they are described in vv. 16-43).

At the end, God promises to remember the covenant even after the people of Israel will be taken out into exile (vv. 42-45).

This covenant is known as "the covenant of Sinai," as it is described in the last verse of the covenant:

These are the statutes and ordinances and laws, which the Lord made between Him and the children of Israel in Mount Sinai by the hand of Moshe. (v. 46)

A similar covenant is made with Israel in the plains of Moav, before Israel enters the Promised Land (*Devarim* 28, *Parashat Ki-Tavo*).

**II. Is the Measure of Punishment Greater than the Measure of Good?**

Reading the sectionsof the blessings and the curses arouses within us a certain sense of unease. The blessings are described in a mere 10 verses, whereas the curses take up 28 verses! This feeling is even sharper with regard to the covenant of the plains of Moav (*Devarim* 28), where the blessings are described in 14 verses (1-14), while the curses take up 53 verses!

Why do the curses take up so much space in relation to the blessings? This question becomes even more acute in light of the words of *Chazal*, who teach that "the measure of good [= reward] is greater than the measure of punishment."[[1]](#footnote-1) In truth, in both of the covenants made between God and Israel, the measure of punishment seems to be much greater than the measure of good!

The Ibn Ezra resolves this difficulty as follows:

The empty-minded say that the curses are more numerous than the blessings, but they do not state the truth. The blessings were stated only in general terms, whereas the curses were spelled out in detail to scare and frighten those who heard them. My words will become clear to one who examines the matter carefully. (Ibn Ezra, *Vayikra* 26:13)

The Ibn Ezra argues that when one "examines the matter carefully," he will see that the curses and the blessing are equal; the curses are simply spelled out in greater detail in order to frighten people so that they not come to sin. The question, however, remains: Why not also spell out the blessings, thereby encouraging people to observe the commandments in order to receive a reward? Why only scare them with the threat of punishment? Moreover, the Ibn Ezra does not explain the specifics; he leaves it to the reader to "examine the matter carefully" on his own.

In this *shiur*,we will attempt to "carefully examine" the section of the blessings and try to understand what these blessings include and why they are written in such an abbreviated form, as opposed to the curses.

**III. The Blessings – Structure and Interpretation**

**The Meaning of the Blessings and Division into Different Groups**

Let us first briefly explain the content of the verses and attempt to divide the blessings into groups. In difficult verses, we will leave the question open, and in the continuation we will discuss the meaning of those verses:

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|  | **The verses** | **The meaning of the verses** |
| **Introduction:**  **Condition** | (3) If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments and do them; |  |
| **Blessing 1:**  **Fertility of the land** | (4) then I will give your rains in their season, and the land shall yield her produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.  (5) And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time;  and you shall eat your bread until you have enough, | Ramban on v. 4: "He began with the matter of rains, because when they come in a timely fashion, the air is good and clean, and the springs and rivers are good, and this will be the reason for bodily health, and the fruit will all multiply and you will be blessed with them."  Rashi on v. 5: "'And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage' – This means that there will be plenty of threshing-work, so that you will be busy with it until the vintage, and with the vintage you will be busy until the time of sowing."  "'And you shall eat your bread until you have enough' – This means one will eat only a little and it will become blessed in his bowels." |
| **?** | and dwell in your land safely. | *Does this verse belong to the previous blessing, the blessing of the land, or to the blessing of peace and security that follows?* |
| **Blessing 2**:  **Peace and calm** | (6) And I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid;  and I will cause evil beasts to cease out of the land, | Ramban on v. 6: "'And I will give peace in the land' – that there will be peace among you, and you will not fight one against his brother."  'And I will cause evil beasts to cease out of the land' – that evil beasts will not come into your land… or He will destroy them so that they not cause damage… because *Eretz* *Yisrael*, when the *mitzvot* will be observed, will be like the world was at first prior to the sin of Adam, when no beast or crawling creature would kill a person." |
| *?* | neither shall the sword go through your land. | *Does this verse belong to the previous blessing of general peace, or to the next blessing*, *which deals with victory over Israel's enemies?* |
| **Blessing 3:**  **Victory over the enemies** | (7)And you shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.  (8) And five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand;  and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. | Rashi on v. 7: "'Before you by the sword' – one by the sword of the other.  Ramban on v. 8: "That He will give them courage and valor to pursue five hundred men, and He will place fear in the heart of the enemies, so that a hundred will flee from five, and they will all fall by the swords of the five."  Rashi: "This means that they will fall before you in a supernatural way."  Ibn Ezra: "That they will fall time after time and not rise up again." |
| **Blessing 4:**  **Fertility** | (9) And I will turn to you,  and make you fruitful, and multiply you; | Rashi on v. 9: "'And I will turn to you' – This means I will turn away from all My business in order to pay you your reward."  Ramban: "'And make you fruitful' – That they will all have fruit of the womb. There will be no barren man or woman among them. He said once again: 'And I will multiply you' – that they will have many offspring, and they will not die, but rather live full lives, and therefore they will be a populous people." |
| **?** | and will establish My covenant with you. | *Is this verse connected to the previous blessing of fertility, or is it connected to the next blessing in verse 11, which deals with the special connection between God and Israel?* |
| **?** | (10) And you shall eat old store long kept,  and you shall bring forth the old from before the new. | *Is this verse connected to the previous blessing of fertility, or is it connected to the blessing of the land at the beginning of the blessings in verses 4-5?* |
| **Blessing 5**:  The resting of the *Shekhina*, or a special connection between God and Israel | (11) And I will set My sanctuary among you, and My soul shall not abhor you.  (12) And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be My people. |  |
| **Summary**: | I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their bondmen; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you go upright. |  |

The section of the blessings deals with five areas in which Israel will be blessed if they keep God's commandments: the fertility of the land, peace and security, victory over their enemies, human fertility, and the resting of the *Shekhina*.

**Interpreting the Difficult Verses**

As noted above, there are several difficult verses in this section, and we must understand their location:

1. The blessing of the land's fertility (v. 5) ends with the blessing: "And you shall dwell in your land safely." This clause can be understood in two senses.

It is possible to read the verse as connected to the previous verses, as it was understood by the Ibn Ezra:

"And you shall dwell in your land safely" – For in days of famine, people become exiled from their places, as in: "When you till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto you her strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shall you be in the earth" (*Bereishit* 4:12).

In other words, the blessing is that the people of Israel will dwell in their land with no fear of famine, which causes people to search for food in other places.

It is also possible to read the verse on its own or in the context of the verses that follow, such that the blessing is that the people will dwell in security, with no fear of enemies. If so, the clause, "And you shall dwell in your land safely," is connected both to the blessing that precedes it and to the blessing that follows it.

2. The blessing of peace ends with the clause: "Neither shall the sword go through your land." This verse can also be understood as being connected to the matter that precedes it or to the one that follows it

One possibility is that the verse is connected to the previous verse and the blessing of peace and calm, as it was understood by Rashi:

It is unnecessary to say that they will not enter your land at war. But this means that they will not enter even to pass by way of your land on their march from one country to another to wage war there.

A second possibility is to read the verse as connected to the verses that follow, in which case the meaning of the blessing, "Neither shall the sword go through your land," is that there will be no wars. According to this possibility, the word "sword" in this verse is connected to the word "sword" that appears twice in the next blessing, "and they shall fall before you by the sword," "and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword."

3. The blessing of human fertility, the fourth blessing, ends with two clauses, the connection of which to the blessing is unclear:

a. "And I will establish My covenant with you." What is the connection between the covenant and fertility? It appears that this clause is connected to the next blessing, which deals with the special relationship between God and Israel:

(11) And I will set My sanctuary among you, and My soul shall not abhor you. (12) And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be My people.

However, it is also possible that there is a connection between the establishment of the covenant and the preceding blessing of fertility, as was understood by the Ibn Ezra:

"And I will establish My covenant with you" – so that you be as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the dust of the earth.

According to this understanding, the entire unit deals with the blessing of fertility. If so, the clause, "And I will establish My covenant with you," belongs both to the blessing of fertility and to the next unit, which deals with the resting of the *Shekhina*.

b. "And you shall eat old store long kept, and you shall bring forth the old from before the new" (verse 10). This verse clearly deals with the fertility of the land. This blessing means that there will be so much grain that they will still be eating of the old grain when the new grain arrives, at which point they will have to clear away the old grain that had not yet been finished. But why does this verse appear here, after the blessing of human fertility, and not in the blessing of the fertility of the land (vv. 4-5)?

The Ibn Ezra explains how this verse is connected to the blessing of fertility:

The wonder is that you will be many, but because of the great amount of grain, one who wishes can eat of the old grain…

In other words, despite the fact that you will be many, the grain will suffice for all of you, and there will even be a surplus.

According to this approach, the fourth blessing (the blessing of fertility) is connected to the first blessing (the blessing of the fertility of the land) by way of the promise that "you shall eat old store long kept."

Another problem with the location of the verse, "and you shall eat old store long kept," is that it separates between the clause, "and I will establish My covenant with you," and the next blessing, which is connected to that clause – the blessing of the resting of the *Shekhina*. This can be explained as follows: At the same time that the fourth blessing is connected to the fifth blessing by way of the verse, "and I will establish My covenant with you," the fourth blessing is connected to the first blessing by way of the verse, "and you shall eat old store long kept."

**The Structure of the Section of the Blessings**

We can summarize by saying that all of the verses whose interpretation is complicated and whose location is problematic are verses that serve as a bridge or connection between one blessing and the blessing that follows it. Thus, we can describe the structure of the verses as five units that are connected one to another by a verse that connects one unit to the next.

What we have here, however, is not merely a series of blessings one after the other that are connected to each other. Rather the verse, "And you shall eat old store long kept," also connects the fourth unit to the first unit, creating a circle.

But why does the fifth unit remain "outside" the circle? Why is the connection to the first blessing made from the fourth blessing and not from the fifth blessing?

The reason seems to be clear: The first four blessings are material blessings, and they therefore are connected to one another and constitute a circle in themselves. The fifth blessing is a blessing of a different sort – a spiritual blessing – and it therefore remains outside the circle of the material blessings.

**IV. The General Blessings and the Specific Curses**

Based on the approach of the Ibn Ezra, let us examine the section of the curses in comparison to the section of the curses. We will see that the curses indeed deal with the very same areas as the blessings, but the curses are more detailed and more drawn out. We will also see that the Torah uses the very same expressions but in an opposite form, thus emphasizing the inverse connection between the blessing and the curse:[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. The blessing of the fertility of the land appears in two verses (vv. 4-5), whereas in the curses there are four verses that deal with the issue:

(16) … and you shall sow your seed in vain[[3]](#footnote-3)

(19) … and I will make your heaven as iron[[4]](#footnote-4) and your earth as brass. 

(20) And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield her produce, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit.[[5]](#footnote-5)

(26) When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, and they shall deliver your bread again by weight; and you shall eat, and not be satisfied.[[6]](#footnote-6)

(29) And you shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall you eat.

Corresponding to "and you shall dwell in your land safely," the Torah describes the departure from the land – the exile:

(32) And I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be astonished at it. 

(33) And you will I scatter among the nations… and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.

(34) Then shall the land be paid her sabbaths, as long as it lies desolate, and you are in your enemies' land; even then shall the land rest and repay her sabbaths.

(35) As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest; even the rest which it had not in your sabbaths, when you dwelt upon it.

2. The blessing of peace and calm is mentioned in one verse (5), where it is briefly stated: "and I will cause evil beasts to cease out of the land."[[7]](#footnote-7) In contrast, the curse specifies what will happen when there are evil beasts in the land:

(22) And I will send the beast of the field among you, which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number; and your ways shall become desolate.

In addition, in the blessing the Torah promises: "And you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid" – a description of the general calm. In contrast, in the curses a description is given of various illnesses that cause "terror" and certainly do not allow for peaceful living:

(25) I will appoint terror over you, even consumption and fever, that shall make the eyes to fail, and the soul to languish;

(25) … and I will send the pestilence among you…

3. The blessing of victory over enemies is mentioned in two verses (7-8), whereas in the curses there are five verses that deal with the issue:

(17) And I will set My face against you,[[8]](#footnote-8) and you shall be smitten before your enemies; they that hate you shall rule over you; and you shall flee when none pursues you.

(25) And I will bring a sword upon you,[[9]](#footnote-9) that shall execute the vengeance of the covenant; and you shall be gathered together within your cities; and I will send the pestilence among you; and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy.

(36) And as for them that are left of you, I will send a faintness into their heart in the lands of their enemies; and the sound of a driven leaf shall chase them; and they shall flee, as one flees from the sword; and they shall fall when none pursues.

(37) And they shall stumble one upon another, as it were before the sword, when none pursues; and you shall have no power to stand before your enemies. 

(38) And you shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up.

4. The fourth blessing deals with a multiplication of the people in one verse, "And I will make you fruitful, and multiply you," whereas in the curses the verses describe several factors that cause a diminishing of the people: the people falling before their enemies (v. 25); falling without a pursuer (vv. 36-37); and, in addition, the loss of many people in exile:

(38)… and the land of your enemies shall eat you up.

(39) And they that are left of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands; and also in the iniquities of their fathers shall they pine away with them.

5. The fifth blessing (vv. 11-12) describes the resting of the *Shekhina* in Israel and the special connection between God and Israel. In contrast, the curses describe God's distancing Himself from Israel in four verses:

(30) And I will destroy your high places, and cut down your sun-pillars, and cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols; and My soul shall abhor you.[[10]](#footnote-10) 

(31) And I will make your cities a waste, and will bring your sanctuaries[[11]](#footnote-11) unto desolation, and I will not smell the savor of your sweet odors. 

(32) And I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be astonished at it.

(33) And you will I scatter among the nations…

Thus, although the quantity of curses is indeed greater than the quantity of blessings, the Ibn Ezra is correct when he says that the curses deal with the same issues that were dealt with in the blessings, but in a more detailed manner.

Two questions arise from our study:

1. Why are the curses more detailed?

2. What is the significance of the structure of the section of the blessings? Why did the Torah see fit to draw connections between the blessings, instead of writing them in an orderly manner and with a clear division?

**V. The Complete Blessings and their Deficiency**

The structure of the section of the blessings creates a circle in which each blessing is connected to another, and together they create a complete circle. It appears that the connection between the blessings teaches us that the complete blessing is when all the blessings come together and fit in one with the other, when no detail is missing. The people of Israel are blessed with economic abundance and with peace and serenity, with security and with a growth in population, and, of course, with the resting of the *Shekhina* among them. When all of these blessings are fulfilled, that is the complete blessing. There is no need to spell out all the details; everything is good.

A blessing that appears in only one area when another area is blemished is a deficient blessing, and it is precisely what is missing that is strongest felt. For example, a person who is in an excellent economic situation but whose health is poor does not feel the blessing, but rather what is missing.

Rashi notes this point in his commentary to one of the verses of the blessings:

"And I will give peace in the land" – Perhaps you will say: Well that there is food and there is drink; but if there is no peace, then all this is nothing! Therefore, the verse states after all these promises: "And I will give peace in the land." From here we learn that peace counterbalances everything. (Rashi, *Vayikra* 27:6)

Rashi explains that the blessing of peace is more important than economic blessing, but we can expand his words and say that true blessing is blessing that includes all areas – a general abundance of good, where all areas of life are blessed. When one aspect is not blessed, when one aspect is deficient, the blessing is incomplete.

The blemish of evil can express itself in different particulars, large or small. Therefore, in the section of the curses it is necessary to specify many different types of "curses," which give rise to the feeling of lacking and of evil. For example, when a person is healthy, we don't specify that he is well in his head, in his eyes, in his hands, in his stomach, in his back, and the like; he is simply healthy and all is good. In contrast, when a person is sick, we specify what ails him, which organ, what type of illness, etc. In order to describe "curses," it is necessary to specify the various possible particulars that can mar the overall good. The perfect good reality is one, whereas deficiencies and evil divide into different types, each of which by itself blemishes the complete good.

Indeed, as the Ibn Ezra noted, the blessing is stated in general terms, whereas the curse is spelled out with the specifics.

**VI. The Measure of Good is Greater**

In the reality of our world, there is never complete blessing, a situation in which all the specifics are good; there is always some element wanting. A person tends to feel what is missing and to pay attention to the bad, sometimes to the point of feeling that everything is bad and that the world is full of things that are wrong. *Chazal*, however, with their assertion that "the measure of good is greater than the measure of punishment," taught us to pay attention to the correct proportions. From where did *Chazal* learn this?

From where do you say that the measure of good is greater than the measure of punishment in the proportion of one to five hundred? Regarding the measure of punishment, it is written: "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them" (*Shemot* 20:4). Regarding the measure of good it is written: "showing mercy unto the thousands" (*Shemot* 20:5). Learn from this that the measure of good is greater than the measure of punishment in the proportion of one to five hundred.[[12]](#footnote-12) (Tosefta, *Sota* [Lieberman] 4:1)

In this *midrash*, *Chazal* point to a very important point: God wants to bestow good on the world. What can be derived from this? First of all, the bestowal of good on the world depends on our actions. God wants to bestow good on the world, and if we would only give Him the chance to do that, if our actions would make us worthy of that, He would bestow upon us an exceedingly great amount of good. Second, the entire world is full of good and blessing, and even if certain elements are missing, even if there are "curses" that certainly mar the perfect good (and sometimes the blemishes are very great), this does not mean that everything is bad. There are still many blessings, and it falls upon us to pay attention to the great blessing in the midst of which we live and to discern that "the measure of good is greater than the measure of punishment."

Translated by David Strauss

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1. See Tosefta, *Sota* (Lieberman) 4:1. Other *midrashim* that express this idea will be cited below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The parallel expressions in the blessings will be noted in the footnotes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rashi explains: "You shall sow, but it will not grow, and if it grows, your enemies will eat it." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Corresponding to the blessing: "I will give your rains in their season" (v. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Corresponding to the blessing: "And the land shall yield her produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit" (v. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Corresponding to the blessing: "And you shall eat your bread until you have enough" (v. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The blessing of peace begins with: "And I will give peace in the land." As it was explained by the commentators, this means that there will be peace among the people, i.e., there will be no civil wars. The curses do not describe a civil war, but v. 37 describes a situation in which people fall upon the swords of their brothers: "And they shall stumble one upon another, as it were before the sword, when none pursues."  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Corresponding to the blessing: "And I will turn to you" (v. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The "sword" is mentioned three times in the blessings and three times in the curses. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Corresponding to the blessing: "And My soul shall not abhor you" (v. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Corresponding to the blessing: "And I will set My sanctuary among you" (v. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Many *midrashim* deal with this issue. We will suffice with two examples that reflect the thinking of these *midrashim*:

    Which measure is greater, the measure of good or the measure of punishment? Say, the measure of good. Surely there is an *a fortiori* argument. If the measure of punishment is less, and one who is doubt about whether he committed a sin is treated as if he committed it with certainty, all the more so regarding the measure of good, which is greater. (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, chap. 30, s.v., *Rabbi Meir*).

    Surely there is an *a fortiori* argument: If the measure of punishment is less, and one who sins in secret, the Holy One, blessed is He, makes him known, all the more so regarding the measure of good, which is greater. (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Bo*, *massekhta de-Pischa*, *parasha* 13, s.v., *vatechezak Mitzrayim*) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)