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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHOT BEHAR - BECHUKOTAI

**The Covenant of Bechukotai and the Mitzva of Shemitta
By Rav Yonatan Grossman**

This year, we read the parashot of Behar and Bechukotai on the same Shabbat. Careful scrutiny of both sections reveals that they are in fact closely intertwined.

Parashat Behar opens by informing us where it was conveyed: "God spoke to Moshe AT HAR SINAI, saying..." (Vayikra 25:1). Many commentaries address this emphasis on location. Rashi, for example, derives from this verse that all of the commandments and their related details were communicated by God to Moshe at Har Sinai; Ramban disagrees. The Rashbam explains "at Har Sinai" to mean "before the erection of the Tabernacle." According to the straightforward reading of the text, Rashbam understands that the Torah sections dealing with the Shemitta and Yovel (the sabbatical year and the jubilee year) mentioned here were actually transmitted to Moshe at Har Sinai, before the remainder of the book of Vayikra was communicated to him. We shall later return to this point.

In the parasha of Bechukotai we read of the blessings that the Jewish people will merit "if you follow My decrees and observe My commandments to fulfill them," and in contrast, the curses that will transpire "if you will not listen to Me and will not fulfill all of these commandments." The ensuing maledictions revolve around the number seven:

"And if you will not listen to Me, I will chastise you sevenfold for your transgressions." (26:18)

"And if you walk with Me with indifference and will not hearken to Me, I will strike you sevenfold according to your transgressions." (26:21)

"I will also strike you sevenfold for your transgressions." (26:24, 26:28)

These recurring expressions which stress the number seven require some explanation. Why does the Torah emphatically connect the curses to the number seven? Why do these curses strike in multiples of seven and why does the Torah have to repeat this fact over and over? This point directs us to the commandments of Parashat Behar, which immediately precede the blessings and curses. The commandments of Behar are also arranged in multiples of seven. The Shemitta, for instance, is to be fulfilled every seventh year: "In the seventh year there shall be a year of complete rest for the land, a shabbat to God. Do not plant your field nor prune your vineyard" (25:4). The commandment of Yovel is even more pronounced: "You shall count seven sabbatical years, seven cycles of seven years. These seven sabbatical years shall equal forty-nine years. You shall sound a blast of the shofar in the seventh month..." (25:8-9). In other words, the Yovel year is to be inaugurated by the shofar in the seventh month, after a count of seven times seven years. The remaining commandments of Parashat Behar also deal, in one way or another, with these central observances of Shemitta and Yovel.

In light of this fact, we may suggest that the blessings and curses in Parashat Bechukotai, which immediately follow these laws, are in fact referring specifically to the observance of Shemitta and Yovel. If the Jewish nation refrains from agricultural pursuits during the Shemitta year, then they will merit the blessings; if not, then the curses will ensue. Therefore, the tokhecha (reproof, i.e. the section of the curses) emphasizes the number seven over and over. This is the fundamental digit for the counting of the seventh year – the Shemitta, and the fiftieth year of the Yovel which occurs after seven countings of seven years.

According to this reading, the blessings and curses do not address the general issue of Torah observance, but rather the specific mitzvot of Shemitta and Yovel. Although the number seven which is common to both sections is not sufficient to prove this connection, additional points which we will now examine reinforce this interpretation.

After God warns the people that exile will follow if they will not listen to Him and will stray with indifference, the verse states:

"I will scatter you among the nations and will unsheathe the sword to pursue you. Your land will be desolate and your cities in ruins. The land shall be appeased for its sabbaths while it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; the land shall rest and have appeasement for its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it shall be at rest, according to the rest that it did not enjoy while you dwelt in it." (26:33-35)

Here it is abundantly clear that the curses – at least the punishment of exile – are meted out for the non-observance of the Shemitta. Since the Jewish people failed to observe this obligation while they dwelt in their land, they must suffer exile and will therefore cease working the land against their will. Similarly, the Torah later states: "The land will be abandoned of them and will be appeased of its sabbaths in desolation. The people, too, shall be forgiven their transgression" (26:43). It is difficult to maintain that the blessings and curses address all of the mitzvot, and that the Shemitta is here stated as an arbitrary example. It seems much more plausible that the curse, in fact, specifically address the mitzva of Shemitta.

An additional point which lends credence to the assumption that the blessings and curses refer specifically to the observance or non-observance of the mitzvot of Shemitta and Yovel is one which we mentioned at the outset: the setting in which they were communicated. As is well known, the book of Vayikra was transmitted to Moshe in the Tabernacle, as is clearly stated at its outset: "God called Moshe and spoke to him in the Tabernacle, saying..." (Vayikra 1:1). In contrast, the beginning of Behar, which introduces the mitzvot of Shemitta and Yovel (at least according to the Rashbam's reading, which we earlier adopted), indicates that the communication took place earlier: "God spoke to Moshe at Har Sinai, saying..." In other words, the parasha deals with a series of things that were transmitted to Moshe while the people were still encamped at Har Sinai.

If in fact the Torah relates here a collection of items that were actually communicated at an earlier date at Har Sinai, then we must determine the extent of this collection. Where does it end and when is the chronological order resumed? The concluding verse of the blessings and curses provides the answer to this question: "These are the decrees, laws and

observances which God concluded between Himself and Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai, by Moshe's hand" (26:46). In other words, what we have here is a complete unit that was transmitted to Moshe at Har Sinai, and for whatever reason was recorded at the conclusion of the book of Vayikra. This unit includes the Shemitta and Yovel as well as the blessings and the curses, which are here recorded as the direct consequence of Israel's observance or non-observance of these laws.

The obvious question which arises is: why does the Torah depart from the chronological sequence, and suddenly introduce at the end of Sefer Vayikra commandments and a covenant which had been communicated to the Jewish people much earlier? Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra provides an answer at the beginning of Parashat Behar (25:1):

"The Torah is not necessarily arranged chronologically. This section in fact precedes the parasha of Vayikra and all the sections that follow it... The reason for its mention here is to connect the various conditions for dwelling in the land [of Israel]. Just as it was stated concerning the forbidden sexual unions that their non-observance would lead to the land spewing the people out, so too was it stated concerning the observance of the Shemitta."

Ibn Ezra understands that the Torah delayed mentioning the commandments of Shemitta and Yovel as well as the blessings and curses until now, in order to establish a connection with the section dealing with sexual immorality. Here also, the Torah states that non-observance will lead to being cast out of the land (see Vayikra 18:28, 20:22), just as exile is promised for failing to observe Shemitta and Yovel.

I would like to adopt the view of Ibn Ezra but to apply it elsewhere. Sefer Vayikra, especially in its first half, deals with the various aspects of the Temple: the laws of sacrifice, the kohanim, tum'a and tahara, etc. Even seemingly unrelated topics are viewed through the prism of the Temple and its sanctity. The sanctity of time, for example, is presented in the context of the Kohen Gadol's service on Yom Kippur. The sanctity of humanity is presented in the context of the service of the kohanim in the Temple. In other words, both the sanctity of time and that of man are presented against the backdrop of the sanctity of place – the Temple!

Lest a person incorrectly assume that the service of the Deity is to be confined to the "place which God shall choose," the second half of Vayikra emphasizes that sanctity is relevant in all places. The behavior of a servant of God is to be conditioned by sanctity even while he is in his home and not directly present in the precincts of the Temple. The Torah therefore emphasizes that the three central elements of place, time and the individual are meaningful not only in the Temple, but everywhere.

1. Sanctity of Persons:

Sefer Vayikra relates much information about the election of the kohanim and their unique responsibilities, but it goes on to state, "Be holy" (19:2), as an imperative addressing all of the people. The kohanim may have unique laws which govern permitted marriages (such as the disqualification of a divorcee, etc.), but the rest of the people are also commanded to desist from sexually immoral practices, wherever they may lie. (This point was stressed by the Ibn Ezra.) The kohanim may have been chosen to serve God in the precincts of the Temple, but there is a similar notion of sanctity that can apply to all people who are prepared to observe the dictates of the Torah. This in fact explains the common expressions that occur in commands addressed to the kohanim as well as to the people.

2. Sanctity of Time:

Although we may already have read about the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur (18:1-34), we later read about all of the holidays which are to be designated as "holy gatherings" on which labor is to be curtailed (23:1-44). The sanctity of time is thus expanded beyond the precincts of the Temple to embrace the world at large.

3. Sanctity of Place:

Now, at the very conclusion of Sefer Vayikra, the Torah re-emphasizes this in a clear and direct manner by introducing the laws of the Shemitta and Yovel. Here the discussion concerns the sanctity of place, and necessitates specific conduct. There may be a specific place where God causes His presence to be manifest, but by the same token "the whole earth is Mine." Through these laws, every tiller of the land must realize that the entire world belongs to God and that by His will alone it is given to man to work it and to derive sustenance. When the nation as a whole desists from working the land every seventh year, it indicates God's ownership of the whole earth, and not only the place of the Temple where His presence is manifest.

The mitzvot of Shemitta and Yovel, together with the blessings and curses that relate to them, are recorded here even though they were transmitted at Har Sinai. This is in order to emphasize the above point at the conclusion of the book which deals more than any other with service of God in His Temple. The commandments are placed upon the Jew wherever he may be; he desists from working the earth because "the whole earth is Mine."

(Translated by Rav Michael Hattin)

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