

## Bechukolotai – 5782

I've lost track of how many years it has been since we began to read the Torah using the concept of the triennial cycle, which means we read one third of each parsha every year. While it has been a blessing in many ways for a number of reasons, there are things that we lose when we follow this modern custom based on the ancient customs of the period of the Second Temple. One of the things we miss is the dramatic reading every year of the section of this week's parsha referred to as the Tochecha. This year, we pick up the parsha AFTER the Tochecha is finished, beginning with Chapter 27 of this, the third book of the Torah. That doesn't mean that I can't reflect on the importance and meaning of the content of Chapter 26 though.

The custom of referring to the contents of Chapter 26 as the Tochecha alludes to the collection of blessings and curses that close off the Book of Leviticus. While there are plenty of mitzvot outlined in the other four books, Leviticus is the one in which the vast majority are covered. It is only fitting then that we close off the book with telling of the children of Israel just what their reward will be if they adhere to the mitzvot and what will happen to them if they don't.

Firstly, I didn't use the designation of the audience as the Children of Israel lightly because in many ways the text relates to the audience as a father would relate to his children. It is no coincidence that on Yom Kippur when we beg forgiveness for our sins, we recite the Aveinu Malkeinu, our father our king. In years past, when various rabbis we had were skilled in reading the Torah themselves, when it came to this parsha, this chapter 26, they would loudly sing the blessings and then run through almost silently

the many curses. One can imagine telling one's children about how much they will be rewarded for doing well with a big voice and smile to go with it. If you promise to be good, guess what we'll do or guess what will be your reward. But if you are bad, said with gritted teeth and a scowl, as many of us might have been heard to say – you better do what I say, or else. As I type these words, I can see Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady singing Just You Wait Henry Higgins, Just You Wait.

Secondly though, the essence of this passage is to remind the Israelites that if they fulfill their half of the bargain, they made with HaShem, the land will be blessed with rain enough to yield the crops necessary to satisfy their needs and create an atmosphere of peace and plenty and harmony with nature. BUT, if they do not hold up the end of their bargain, then, to be blunt, all hell will break out. The wonder of these verses is that they are holding true even today. Ecologists and geopoliticians are suggesting that climate change will mean that there will be great instability in rainfalls and when as well as where they occur which will lead to food shortages and instability which then will lead to social and political unrest and so forth. Whoever suggested that our Torah has nothing meaningful to say to us today?

However, to really make what we read or hear in this parsha mean something we have to consider the major focus of the words. The text tells us that if we live up to the expectations of HaShem, then he will send the rains in their due season and the land will yield abundant crops and feed the Children of Israel leading to prosperity. It's no coincidence, as I have often noted before that just where this parsha occurs is precisely before Shavuot. In order to ensure the timing is right, the parsha is often combined with the previous one, Behar. Why is this important? Shavuot

comes exactly 50 days after Pesach. We have been counting the Omer to ensure we mark each day. The second day of Pesach we stopped adding every Shacharit service the pleas for winds and rain because presumably, the grain is already growing. The land is yielding its harvest. We begin praying for rain again after Sukkot. The cycle of our year is based upon the annual rain cycle. The ancients knew that an agricultural society needed moisture in the form of dew and plentiful rainfall in order to survive. After all, it was famine that took Jacob and his family to Egypt in the first place and presumably, our slavery there came about because we had lost sight of who we were and what HaShem expected of us.

I hear the words of two more Broadway musicals echoing in my head. There is a reason for that though. Even though we no longer require rain to the same extent as the ancient agricultural societies did, we still must continue to understand the role rain plays in driving societies forward or backward. The Tochecha might be focussed on the rain necessary to grow the wheat necessary to make bread, the staff of life in the ancient world. But it is also referring to the wider covenant between us and our creator, to acknowledge our place in the universe and show the proper respect necessary to keep life in balance. That's a message that deserves to be sung loudly even today but now; we need to remind those who hear that the curses are upon us unless we do something each of us to make the negative outcomes less likely. We each of us have to jump on the scales to ensure they return to balance.