

This evening, our hearts are pulled in many different directions. Trying to make sense of the world, to feel hopeful about a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, attempting as well to not become pessimistic about the future of this country, and to understand the vicissitudes of our own lives, with so many blessings and curses. And as I hold all of it, knowing that tomorrow Rabbi Timoner will be speaking at length about Israel, I want to meditate with you instead on this week's Torah portion, Bechukotai, and one of the major lessons I think we learn from this final segment of Leviticus.

Im Bechukotai Te-lechu, this parsha begins, if you follow my laws, v'et Mitzvotai tish'mru, and you observe my commandments, v'asitem otam, and do them – all manner of blessing will shine upon you. And of course, if you don't follow G-d's commandments, then you will be cursed.

From these very first words, and then onward throughout the parsha, Bechukotai lays out a conditional agreement, saying that in order for good things to happen to you, you must do exactly what G-d says. And right off the bat, the text loses credibility for most of us modern readers.

We are not the first generation of Jews to know that sometimes bad things happen to people who follow all of the commandments, and surely good things happen to those of us who don't succeed at following them all. Even our most ancient sages understood that something must be missing in the parsha's calculus. Early rabbis taught that if a person doesn't follow all of G-d's laws, they can still receive blessing by repenting and doing teshuva. And they explain that following one important commandment is sometimes equal to following them all.

These are good reframings. I admire them, and basically agree with them. But I think they let the parsha off too easily. These statements belie a greater truth in this parsha, which is that G-d *does* expect something from us. Our Torah includes 613 commandments. And we are responsible, as Jews, to grapple with each of them.

But whether or not we can expect blessing to come from performing commandments, we might ask: why does G-d need us to follow commandments at all?

Why does the character of G-d appear so needy, and so fragile in the Torah? If G-d loves the Israelite people, and for that matter, if G-d presumably has the power to get anything G-d wishes, why is it that G-d seems to *need* so much from us? Isn't it enough merely to treat each other fairly? To follow the laws that make sense in modern life? Why does G-d *need* us to follow all these commandments to prove ourselves worthy?

Part of the answer might be found in the very first clause, “im *bechukotai* telechu,” if you follow my *chukim*, my laws. But these specific commandments, *chukim*, as in “*bechukotai*” are not just laws. The rabbis understand the word “*chukim*” to refer to the laws in our tradition that aren't immediately obvious for human beings. Laws like wearing tzitzit or keeping kosher, or not mixing wool and linen in our garments. It's these laws in particular that take precedence in the parsha as a key requirement for receiving blessing.

We might therefore say that by performing commandments that are mysterious to us, by accepting that there are things in the universe we don't understand or control, we set ourselves up for blessing. It's not enough to follow the laws that create order in the world, those mishpatim that prohibit us from lying and stealing. In fact, it's by committing to things that we can't fully explain, that opens us up to the blessing of being alive.

This is one of the hardest things for modern people to accept. We assume that science will give us an answer to everything, and we know that some things in our world are better thanks to scientific and technological advances. But science and reason sometimes fail us. As we know, new technologies for weaponry don't always make society better. 20th Century Europe proved how much destruction technology could bring about. And we are living out in real time, the devastation in Gaza that military science has wrought.

On an even deeper level, we must also acknowledge that we might never attain scientific answers to why certain things happen in our lives or, most importantly, how we can live lives of meaning. And so our tradition offers us these chukim, inviting us into a world of mystery; calling us humbly to accept that the world is filled with things humans may never fully understand.

The classic rabbis whose words are retained in the Midrash Rabbah taught that when G-d created the universe, it was by way of chukim. Ancient Jews assumed that the Torah itself was a kind of blueprint for the world. But *these* rabbis specify that it was the chukim in the Torah that allowed G-d to

mark out the boundary between Heaven and earth, between sun and moon, and between sand and sea. By reading the laws that human beings may never fully understand, G-d marked off limits of existence that remain perplexing to humankind. Only by following laws that are mysterious can we attempt to get closer to the secrets of the universe.

This approach may or may not do it for you. But faced with so much we can't understand – why, for instance, bad things happen to good people – this rabbinic commentary asks us to remember that there is merit in accepting that some things defy human explanation. And sometimes, a commandment like wearing tzitzit is good and meaningful even if we don't understand it.

It may be that G-d's punishments for not living up to the commandments do not come from a desire to punish, but rather a desire to deter us from taking the wrong path. With our focus on chukim, we might add that the wrong path leads us *away* from purpose or meaning, and not towards it.

The great 20th century thinker Martin Buber explained that when we get bogged down by the minutiae of each commandment, we forget that the point of any commandment is to be in relationship with the divine. Commandments are second person. In his words, “They begin with the I and every one of them addresses the Thou in person. An I “commands” and a Thou—every Thou who hears this Thou—“is commanded.””

In other words, every single commandment – from the most rational to the most ridiculous – is an attempt at connection with some kind of purpose,

some kind of Creator. We may not actually find the answers we seek, but the *pursuit* of answers is what gives our lives meaning.

Each of us today, performing these rituals, enters a crucible in which meaning is forged. That is, if we want it to be. If we allow ourselves the space to accept truth in places where we didn't expect it, and if we move beyond the strangeness of saying these words, bowing, and studying, we open ourselves up to the possibility of more purpose in our lives than we might've thought.

These days, it's very easy to succumb to despair. To maybe wish for blessing, but to assume that curses will abound no matter what we do. As the war rages on in Gaza, as our own election season gets louder and scarier, and as each day brings difficult personal news compounding all the rest of it. Notwithstanding the many historical or scientific explanations we might offer for why the world has become so unstable, we still have to find some way of living in it. And seeking wisdom in Jewish tradition in spite of how much we may not understand about it...is one way to do that.

And *that is*, I think, the reason for this parsha's conditional mood: if we accept that there is mystery in our world, if we lean into it and don't try to control it, leaving room for what will remain unknown, then we open ourselves up to the *possibility* of blessing.

Shabbat Shalom.