

Shabbat Shalom.

This week, in our Torah cycle, we've finally made it to the end of Leviticus. And we might breathe a sigh of relief. Gone are the parshas of skin afflictions and sacrifices, of technical instructions for the ancient priesthood. And soon enough we'll return to the narratives in the book of Numbers, with censuses and spies and talking donkeys. But this week, as we read the double portion of Behar-Bechukotai, Leviticus rounds out its treatment of laws, not by *listing* yet another set of mitzvot, but instead detailing their outcome. Bechukotai literally means "within my laws," and the text is devoted to the blessings that follow from *observing* the laws.

But Bechukotai is something of a misnomer for this parsha. The portion actually begins with the word IM. Im Bechukotai Telechu. Meaning IF you follow my laws. And it begins in the Torah's characteristic conditional...: *If* you follow my laws, and faithfully observe my commandments, God says...I will grant you rains in their season. The earth shall yield produce and the trees their fruit...I will grant PEACE in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone. And it continues with a long list of other blessings and curses that the people will experience, should they, according to the Torah, follow all of God's commandments.

We usually name parshas for the first important word in the text, and in this case, I would argue, the IM, is actually as important as the word *bechukotai*. Because the essence of the parsha hinges on the word "if,"...presenting a conditional for the blessings and curses therein. And as for the blessings themselves, it turns out that these blessings are actually rather realistic. Though other religions insist that if you follow their core dogmas, you'll merit a spot in paradise, or some other supernatural reward, *the Torah* says that if you follow the rules, then life will turn out well for you. Rain, sustenance, peace. It's pretty straightforward and human. Do good things in this world and the world will be good to you. End of story.

And boy, do I want to believe in that: A world in which if we just do everything right, then things will turn out OK. Where if we act fairly, then we

will bring about fairness among people. Or if we behave with kindness, we'll find kindness in return. A world in which our righteous indignation is rewarded with moral leadership, and just outcomes.

But we know that that world is very far off from what we see around us today.

Most of us go through our lives trying to be good. We do our best to conduct business fairly, to treat people with kindness, to speak out against injustice, and to follow the ethical and ritual traditions of Judaism, and yet the shalom baaretz described in this week's parsha remains elusive. Not only is our world filled with suffering, especially right now, but each of us inevitably struggles with all manner of anxieties, burdens, and afflictions.

But ain chadash tachat hashemesh. We are not the first Jews to recognize the Bible's dissonance with reality. Even our rabbis understood that the Torah's calculus about blessings and curses isn't really how the world operates. In a lengthy treatment of reward and punishment in tractate Kiddushin, the overarching talmudic view is articulated by Rabbi Yaakov on page 39b. He says: There is not a single mitzvah written in the Torah whose real reward is not in the world to *come*. What he means...is that good behavior is not always rewarded with positive outcomes during our lifetimes. If good things happen to us, then we're lucky. But we shouldn't expect blessings to rain down upon us just because we follow the Torah's teachings.

This is pretty disappointing. Here we are trying so hard all the time to do the right thing, ideally in a manner consistent with Torah values...and for what? In our personal, professional, and political lives, we neurose and agitate, we strive to do what's honorable and pursue justice, and still the world feels so off kilter.

Ecclesiastes puts it this way: "the race is not won by the swift. Nor the battle by the valiant. Nor is bread won by the wise. Nor wealth by the

intelligent. Nor favor by the learned. For the time of death comes for them all.”

That’s it? Just when we hope a “but” is coming, the text ends with a hard truth, and leaves little room for magic, or redemption of any kind.

And yet...despite all the ways in which our tradition anticipates the random nature of life, accepting that suffering will endure even if we hold fast to our values, we are nonetheless expected...commanded, even...to follow the rules.

Commenting on this parsha, the Hasidic sage known as the Sfat Emet argues that, “Even though the sages taught that there is no reward in this world for fulfilling the commandments, that is true only rationally and from our human point of view. But in fact,” he says, “...the connection between the world and Torah is higher than the rational mind [can reach].” In effect, he explains, we actually do benefit from the performance of mitzvot, even when we can’t understand how.

The cynics among us might roll our eyes at that. But Rabbi Art Green explains the Sfat Emet’s teaching this way: “For the one who rationalizes his religion,” he says, “counting up the good deeds performed and seeking appropriate payment, there is indeed no reward to be had in this world...But who is the one who perceives this reward? The person who lives by faith, seeking always, even without understanding, to do nothing other than to ‘follow God’s laws.’”

In other words: having faith. Our whole tradition of *doing*, of performing mitzvot, of prioritizing deed over creed, boils down to keeping the faith that all of this actually matters. That we are better off, and the world is better off, when we hold onto our values, and try to enact them in the world...even if the world doesn’t actually feel any better.

And this week, friends, it has been hard to keep that faith. When it feels like the world just continues to break down, despite our sincerest efforts to repair it.

The news from Washington, D.C. on Wednesday night felt like a gut punch. Even cast against a backdrop of so much other trauma, I know that many of us here were overwhelmed by grief, anger, and fear when we woke up to the news that two staffers from the Israeli embassy had been murdered. It pained us all the more to learn the details. That the young couple, Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Milgrim, were a week away from getting engaged. That they were targeted for being Jewish, and for being associated with Israel. And that their suspected attacker said explicitly that he, in his words, “did it for Palestine.”

For the past two days, we have found ourselves trying to make sense of it. Locating this horrific episode in the unfolding catastrophe of October 7th and the war in Gaza, and within the ferment of binary thinking about Israel and Palestine.

Surely there is plenty of analysis to offer, but that will have to come in some other sermon. Because all I have in my heart right now is the desire to grieve, and to acknowledge how horrible all of this feels. Mourning these two innocent people; grappling with the rising antisemitism of this moment, and the pain of being Jewish in this world; bearing witness to the ongoing suffering of Palestinians in Gaza; the death toll rising by the day; the hunger, and vulnerability and fear of innocent children; and also the languishing of Israeli hostages who remain in Gaza, for whom we pray each week. And also and also and also.

It may feel, at times, like holding all of this suffering together, and resisting the easy narratives or hot takes all around us...doesn't do us any good. Better we should hold one party line, so at least the pain of it all isn't *also* **confusing**. And yet, many of us choose instead to sit in the excruciating morass of human tragedy from many different angles at once...opening ourselves up to every aspect of this trauma...to cry out for justice and

peace, while also knowing that those with the power to end this madness have not yet listened to our cries.

We may wonder if there's any point to caring as much as we do, insisting upon nuance, and to value all human life, when it seems to make no difference in the world. But here, too, we have to have faith. We know there are some *actions* we can take in this moment, and we've mentioned them before from our bimah. Donating, protesting, speaking the truth. But above all, we need to not give up the belief that our caring, for both Israelis and Palestinians...really does matter. We must not slip into nihilism or despair or the belief that nothing we do counts for anything.

Because our tradition insists that even when we can't see the practical outcome of our highest ideals or our smallest actions, both of those things really do matter.

We may not live in a world of blessings raining down upon us just because we try to live in accordance with our values. The world is still broken, and our prayers for peace remain unanswered. But we pray anyway, and we agitate, and care, and pursue justice, anyway, because the language of Bechukotai isn't just a contract, of ifs and thens. It is, in fact, an invitation to believe. It is an insistence that we have some agency in this world, even when the outcomes are beyond us.

We may not see the blessings for which we yearn, but our faith in a world of blessing and goodness is always transcendent.

Shabbat Shalom.