

B'KHUKKOTAI

Vayikra Chapters 26:3 – 27:34

Eitz Hayim 747-57; Hertz 542-550; Plaut 957-970

Parashat *B'khukkotai* is one of the shortest parashiot in the annual reading cycle of readings.¹ That is why, on many years, it is combined with the immediately preceding parashah, *Behar*. It is also why that some divisions of readings are identical for the annual and the triennial cycles; our own just incorporates a lot of overlap.

B'hukkotai includes most of Chapter 26 and all of Chapter 27, and it concludes the book of *Vayikra* (*Leviticus*) with the usual Hazak-Hazak-v'nitzhazak. *Behar*, which we read last week, is full of moral and theological commandments, as well as rules for the sabbatical year every seven years, and for the Jubilee every 50th year (after seven sabbatical years). *Behar* concludes with two verses from Chapter 26 that *Eitz Hayim* calls a “postscript” even though they are the first two verses in the chapter:²

1 You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship upon, for I the Lord and your God. 2 You shall keep my Sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary, Mine, the Lord's.

I cannot even begin to guess why these two verses are placed at the end of Parashat *Bahar* rather than at the start of Parashat *B'hukkotai*.

After those two verses, Chapter 26 logically goes on to expound the second of three sets of blessings that will support, and curses that will afflict, the Israelites if they observe or, alternatively, ignore G/d's Torah. The first set is a “shorter and less frightening homily” (Plaut 953) in Parashat *Mishpatim* (Shemot 23:20ff), and the third is a longer and almost totally unforgiving screed in Parashat *Ki Tavo* (*Devarim* 27 and 28). As stated in *Eitz Hayim* (953), “In all three cases, an extensive legal section is followed by promises and threats.” However, only in *B'hukkotai* are the promises and threats followed by a final and seemingly unconditional promise of redemption.

Those blessings and curses will be the focus of this d'var, but, first, I want to note one additional peculiarity of *B'hukkotai*. If verses 1 and 2 are a postscript, Chapter 27 is an annex. As many readers have noted, it seems as if the priests writing *Vayikra* got to the end and suddenly remembered lots of stuff that they had neglected to deal with, notably vows, gifts, and dues—all critical to the well-being of the Temple. Therefore, they stuck them together in this final chapter. Chapter 27 is not, in my view, very interesting material, which is why my d'var reviews Chapter 26 with its blessings and curses.

¹ The shortest is Vayelech (Dvr 30:1-30:30), which has only 30 verses.

² Unless otherwise stated, translations of the Torah are taken from *Eitz Hayim*.

Eitz Hayim considers the blessings and curses in B'hukkotai as an epilogue to the whole Holiness Code (that is, Chapters 17-26 of Vayikra, which can be read as a separate book). Its commentary starts as follows (747):

Two major principles of biblical religion find expression in this epilogue: the concept of free will and the doctrine of reward and punishment. Obedience to God's will brings great reward; disobedience brings dire punishment. The choice is left to the people Israel and its leaders.

Unfortunately, observation makes it easier to rationalize free will than reward and punishment. Worse yet, there is no easy comparison between the four relatively short paragraphs of blessing and the eight longer paragraphs of curses. Nobody can be comfortable with them. Typically, the curses are all read in a single Aliyah, and the Torah reader recites them in quiet voice, as if just voicing them was a threat to the community. No one considered it an honour to receive the Aliyah that contained the curses, and, sad to say, many authors remark that that it was typically given to a local pauper or some no-good-nick. Less sadly, some contracts for rabbis specified that they were to accept the Aliyah for the portions with the blessings and curses so no one could argue that he (sexism intended) was personally condemned.

Some Biblical commentators downplay the disparate length given to curses over blessings because, in their view, the *quality* of the blessings are said to overwhelm the *quantity* of the curses. Perhaps, but that is not how I read them. Others make up text to expand the blessings. Thus, *Leviticus Rabbah* (35:10) is quoted in *Eitz Hayim* (747, note to verse 4) as saying that G/d will not only send rain as a blessing but also "only make it rain at times convenient for the people."

However, no matter how much one qualifies and interprets the curses, most people will agree that they overwhelm the blessings in both quantity and quality. The commentary in the Hertz Chumash makes this abundantly clear: First it notes that (543), "In dealing with the consequences of faithfulness, the Torah speaks in general terms; but in regard to the disobedience, the Prophetic warning describes in detail what would befall the sinful people."

Of course, much of the commentary is straightforward exegesis. For example, since it is a rabbinic principle that there is no repetition in the Torah, *The Soncino Chumash* takes the phrase that opens *B'hukkotai*—"If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments"—as meaning to study the commandments in the first half and to observe them in the second. As well, despite their foreboding tone, the blessings and curses are carefully and even poetically composed. Consider for example the blessings in 26:4-5:

I will grant your rains in their seasons, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the tree of the field their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.

And now consider this curse from 26:36:

As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues.

I will close my d'var with reference to that part of the sequence of blessings and curses in *B'hukkotai* that is truly unique. The whole tone begins to change with the sixth and final paragraph of curses. We learn that the survivors of earlier curses have become "heartsick" (26:39) over their errors and those of their fathers, and that they have become humble and eager to atone. Appropriately, G/d begins to think about forgiving the Israelites partly because of the merits of Abraham and Jacob, and partly because of the inherent merits of the land, terms, both of which are concepts that appear elsewhere in the Torah.

At first, the change of heart is presented partially and cautiously, as with the very next paragraph (26:43), which tells them what life will be back then as they start atoning:

For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws.

Only in verse 44 is the change of pace signalled earlier in the previous paragraph made definite. No longer just an option, G/d states clearly in 26:44:

Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God. I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the Lord.

Nothing even remotely like this appears in the later set of blessings and curses in Devarim (Deuteronomy). Here, when we are still wandering in the desert, there is hope; there, at a time when we are settled in the Promised Land, not much, if any. I am glad that I am doing my d'var on the desert period of our Jewish history.

Shabbat shalom,

Further Reading

See Contemporary Reflection, which follows the parashah in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (2008, pp. 782-783), which begins, "There is something profoundly unsettling about *B'chukotai*. It seems to posit a world that we know, empirically, does not exist" and goes on to suggest why it is written that way.