

# PARSHAS BECHUKOSAI

by Shlomo Katz

## Parshas Bechukosai

### Volume 25, No. 33

This week's parashah describes the exile and other punishments which, G-d forbid, befall Bnei Yisrael if they fail to keep the mitzvot, in general, and the mitzvah of shemittah, in particular. We read (26:34), "Then the land will be appeased for its sabbaticals during all the years of its desolation, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals." (According to Ramban z"l, this prophecy refers primarily to the exile which followed the destruction of the first Bet Hamikdash, while the tochachah / rebuke that appears in Parashat Ki Tavo refers primarily to our present exile, following the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash.)

R' Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein z"l (1848-1896; Nowy Dwor, Poland) notes that the last phrase in the above verse ("then the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals") seems to be redundant. He explains:

The sin of neglecting the shemittah is two-fold: First, there is the fact that one has neglected G-d's command, and, second, there is the fact that one has missed an opportunity to testify that G-d is the Master of the Land. To rectify this sin, one must do two things: First, one must let the Land rest for as many years as it would have rested had the shemittah been properly observed, and, second, we must be exiled. This is middah k'negged middah / measure for measure; since we have failed to acknowledge G-d's ownership of the Land, we may not be in the Land. The redundancy emphasizes that the exile will be exactly as long as is needed to accomplish these two purposes; as related in Divrei Ha'yamim (II 36:21), "This [exile] was in fulfillment of the word of Hashem . . . all the years of its desolation it rested, to the completion of seventy years." (Shem Olam)

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*"If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments . . ." (26:3)*

Rashi writes that "If you will follow My decrees" refers to toiling in Torah study. If so, writes R' Akiva Yosef Schlesinger z"l (Hungary and Yerushalayim; died 1922), we can understand why this verse

follows immediately after the verse, "My Sabbaths you shall observe." Specifically, the Midrash Tanna D'vei Eliyahu states that the primary time for Torah study is on Shabbat, when one is free from working. (Torat Yechiel)

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*"I will cause wild beasts to withdraw from the Land . . ." (26:6)*

Our Sages disagree about the precise meaning of this verse: The Sage Rabbi Yehuda says that wild beasts will be completely eradicated from the world, while the Sage Rabbi Shimon says that it will be a greater praise of G-d if wild beasts will still exist but will cease to be dangerous, as the verse states (Yeshayah 11:6), "The wolf will live with the sheep and the leopard will lie down with the kid; and a calf, a lion cub, and a meri [will walk] together, and a young child will lead them."

What is the point of disagreement between these Sages? R' Raphael Moshe Luria z"l (rosh yeshiva in several chassidic yeshivot in Israel; died 2009) writes:

The Gemara (Eruvin 13b) records a dispute between the Sages of Bet Shammai and of Bet Hillel, in which the former say that man would have been better off never having been created, while the latter say that man is fortunate that he was created. What does this mean? R' Luria explains:

Kabbalists teach that the soul is forced to come into this physical world only so that it can earn closeness to G-d in the World-to-Come. While G-d could have given the soul such closeness without its having to toil in this world, that would have given the soul the feeling of receiving charity, which would be embarrassing. It follows, argue the Sages of Bet Shammai, that being in this world is not an ideal state; rather, man would have been better off not having been created.

Not so, say the Sages of Bet Hillel. Man was created for another reason also, i.e., because G-d wants to be revealed in this world. It follows, therefore, that man is better off having been created so that he can bring about G-d's revelation in this world.

Consistent with their respective opinions, we are told that the Sage Shammai always saved his best food for Shabbat, which represents the World-to-Come, while the Sage Hillel had the philosophy, "G-d is blessed every day."

This, writes R' Luria, is the point of disagreement between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon as well. Rabbi Yehuda holds that our world is not an ideal state, and that G-d's greatness will be revealed only by the elimination of all evil, represented here by the eradication of wild beasts. Rabbi Shimon, on the other hand, maintains that G-d wants to be revealed in this world through the harnessing of the forces of evil for good, represented here by all types of beasts living together in harmony. (Beit Genazai: Vayikra p.1060)

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*"I will turn my attention to you . . ." (26:9)*

Rashi z"l explains: [G-d is saying, so-to-speak,] "I will turn away from all My affairs to pay your reward."

R' Yechezkel Landau z"l (1713-1793; rabbi of Prague) writes that the heightened Divine attention to us that is described in this verse is what we refer to when we speak of G-d resting His "Shechinah" among us. When the Jewish People do the will of G-d, He focuses His attention on us, which causes increased blessings to flow to the Jewish People and, incidentally, to the entire world. On the other hand, if we sin, then he removes His Shechinah from us and sustains us only incidentally to sustaining the rest of the world. (She'eilot U'teshuvot Noda B'Yehuda Vol. II, O.C. No. 107)

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*"I will make the Land desolate, and your enemies who dwell upon it will be desolate." (26:32)*

Rashi z"l comments: This is a benefit to the Jewish People that their enemies will never feel at home in the Land and will leave it desolate.

R' Yechiel Michel Tikochinsky z"l (1871-1955; editor for 51 years of an annual calendar documenting the customs of Eretz Yisrael and Yerushalayim; also author of the widely-used work on mourning, Gesher Ha'chaim) is quoted by his son as frequently remarking that it is not a coincidence that Hashem gave Eretz Yisrael into the stewardship of the Arabs during most of the long exile. Had the Land been occupied by Europeans, they surely would have settled it and changed its essence, as they did every other place that they conquered and colonized. Because of Hashem's kindness to us, the Land lay desolate for almost 2,000 years so that we alone could rebuild it. (Ir Ha'kodesh Ve'ha'mikdash: Hakdamat Ben Ha'mechaber p.17)

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*"Then they will confess their sin and the sin of their forefathers, for the treachery with which they betrayed Me . . . I, too, will behave toward them with casualness and I will bring them into the land of their enemies." (26:40-41)*

Why, if Bnei Yisrael confess their sins, will Hashem behave toward them with casualness and bring them to the land of their enemies? R' Moshe Freidiger z"l (communal leader in Pest, Hungary) explains:

Teshuvah means confessing one's sins and not making excuses. Here, Bnei Yisrael will confess, but

they will justify their actions by saying that their forefathers acted the same way. Such a "teshuvah" will be rejected. (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

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## Pirkei Avot

*Ben Zoma says, "Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion." (Ch.4)*

R' Yoel Sirkes z"l (the Bach; 1561-1640) explains: Every person's earnings are made up of two parts - the portion that a person is obligated to give as terumah, ma'aser, and charity, and the portion that is his to enjoy. Some people are not happy unless they keep both shares for themselves, but a truly wealthy person is the one who is content with keeping his own portion and giving the other portion to its rightful recipients. (Meishiv Nefesh: Introduction)

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*Rabbi Shimon says: "There are three crowns--of Torah, of kehunah / the priesthood, and of rulership; but the crown of a good name is above all of them." (Ch.4)*

The Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat 7:11) states that the members of a court that judges monetary matters should have seven characteristics: wisdom, humility, fear of G-d, hatred of money, love of truth, love of other people, and possessing a good name.

The Vilna Gaon writes in his commentary there: "Masters of a good name-- anshei chayil / men of strength."

What does this mean? R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) explains:

One does not earn a truly good name merely by performing isolated "good" deeds. Rather, a master of a good name is a person who is recognized as having internalized and mastered the traits of goodness and yosher (loosely translated "honesty," but best understood by the Yiddish term "erlichkeit"). Such a person has made these traits his essence.

It follows that becoming the master of a good name requires tremendous and consistent inner strength. Such a person is a true "person of strength." (Be'er Eliyahu)

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