

THE CONDITION OF THE BLESSING

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לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BLESSING

The first half of Parashat B'hukotai is made up of the promise of Divine blessing (if the B'nei Yisra'el observes all of God's commandments, 26:3-13) and the threat of Divine disfavor and curse (if they fail to do so - vv. 14-45). Although a complete analysis of both parts of this text is beyond the scope of this forum, we will try to present an analysis of the nature of the blessing:

* 3: If you walk in My statutes and observe My commandments and do them.

* 4: I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.

* 5: Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land.

* 6: And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land.

* 7: You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.

* 8: Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.

* 9: I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you.

* 10: You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new.

* 11: I will place My dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you.

* 12: And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.

* 13: I am Hashem your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.

Let's examine the opening line - the condition of the blessing:

If you walk in My statutes and observe My commandments and do them.

All of the consequent blessings are contingent on our fulfilling this brief directive. What is the meaning of this Divine command, fulfillment of which carries so many wonderful blessings, such as peace, prosperity and national holiness?

Before moving on, there is an anomaly in the structure of the blessing section which calls for our attention. Note the table below:

Verse - Promise

3 - The Condition

4 - Bountiful Crops

5 - Plenty and Security

6 - Peace in the Land

7-8 - Military Success

9 - Fertility and Recovenanting (see Rashi and S'forno ad loc.)

10 - Bountiful Crops (again!)

11 - God's Sanctuary in our Midst

12 - God's Presence in our Midst

13 - Concluding Sentence

As can be seen, v. 9 is a natural conclusion; however, there are another four verses in the blessing. So, the second question is what we are to make of these two blessing-sections. If it were not for v. 10, which returns to the theme of agricultural success, it would have been simple to identify the first section as financial, political and military success; the second could be tagged as spiritual excellence. The inclusion of v. 10, *va'Akhaltem Yashan Noshan, v'Yashan miP'nei Hadash Totzi'u* - (you shall eat old grain long stored and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new) makes this division untenable. Is there some other way to divide the blessings - or can we reorient our understanding of either v. 10 or v. 9 (the first "conclusion") that will help our understanding of this section?

Our final question is more fundamental to the nature of the blessing: Aren't we taught that we should perform Mitzvot because we were so commanded - or because they represent the most noble "life-style"? Why does the Torah present this list of agricultural, political, military and spiritual "rewards" for doing that which we are otherwise obligated to do?

In order to address these questions, let's return to the first verse and the seeming redundancy. We will find two approaches among the Rishonim which, if taken together, will be the key to understanding this blessing.

II

UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITION

RASHI'S APPROACH: "'AMELIM BATORAH"

Rashi, following the Torat Kohanim, addresses the seeming redundancy in the first verse: "If you walk in My statutes: I might think that this refers to fulfillment of Mitzvot; but when it says And observe My Mitzvot, observance of Mitzvot is already stated. If so, how do I understand If you walk in My statutes? that you should be laboriously engaged in Torah study. (SheTih'yu 'Amelim baTorah".)

In other words, Rashi understands the condition which we must fulfill as made up of two components: We have to observe the Mitzvot and we must also be 'Amelim baTorah - laboring in Torah study.

S'FORNO'S APPROACH: "USH'MARTEM ZU MISHNAH"

R. Ovadia S'forno, bothered by the same redundancy, arrives at a similar conclusion - but from an opposite textual direction. He understands that "walking in My statutes" refers to the performance of Mitzvot - and that *Mitzvotai Tishmoru* refers to study. He bases this on the statement in the Sifri: uSh'martem - zu Mishnah ("observing" refers to learning). (Sifri R'eh #6)

In summary, Rashi and S'forno both understand that the blessings will only be fulfilled when and if the B'nei Yisra'el accomplish both performance of Mitzvot and Torah study. What, then, is their bone of contention - what underscores their different textual derivation?

III

ENGAGED ACTION

Both Rashi and S'forno are addressing the issue of cognitive awareness in the performance of Mitzvot. Rashi sees the mode of performance which will ensure these blessings as "intellectually engaged action". Although a person may properly fulfill a Mitzvah while only being familiar with the operative details - e.g. how to hold the Lulav with the other three species, how much Tzedakah to give - someone who is intellectually engaged in the details, concepts and import of a particular Mitzvah will have a greatly enhanced experience when performing that Mitzvah. To that end, Rashi reads the first phrase of the verse as referring to "laborious Torah study" - the hard work which goes into clarifying Halakhic concepts, analyzing various approaches and formulae etc. With that level of involvement, the performance which follows reflects a total involvement - i.e. loving God with all of the heart.

INTEGRATED ACTION

S'forno accentuates a different component of the cognitive perspective in Mitzvah-observance. He picks up the process where Rashi left off - with the performance of Mitzvot which is enhanced with intellectual involvement. S'forno raises the bar to a new level - not only must we come to the performance of Mitzvot armed with our own cognitive involvement; we must maintain that level of awareness while we are engaged in the performance. That is why S'forno emphasizes the "guarding = learning" equation - holding onto that which we have learned while performing, avoiding the all-too-common dichotomy of knowledge and action which, although consistent with each other, are often relegated to different times and settings.

Both of these Rishonim understand that in order for us to receive the blessings which follow, we must achieve a level of observance of Mitzvot which includes an investment of learning and attaching that intellection with the action implied therein. In order to understand this demand, let's address the other two questions.

IV

YASHAN NOSHAN

As mentioned above, we were promised that we would have a bountiful harvest (vv. 4-5); the sequence from there on seems to spiral "upward", to political security, military success and spiritual fulfillment. Why does the Torah "jump back" to the agricultural theme in v. 10? (You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new.)

If we look at the previous verse (the "first conclusion", v. 9), we can see a subtle shift in the focus and nature of the blessing. Up until this point, we have been promised many blessings - and now God promises that He will turn to us and fulfill His covenant with us. Which covenant is meant here?

As Ibn Ezra points out, we might posit that the earlier part of the verse, the promise of fertility, is the "covenant" association - a fulfillment of the covenant with Avraham that we would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. There is, however, another critical component of the B'rit Avraham which may be the stress and shift here.

When Avraham was first commanded to go to the Land, God told him that he would be a source of blessing for all people. This promise was repeated at the Akedah - the concluding narrative of Avraham's life. Along with the Land and numerous descendants, God promised that Avraham's "all nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed" (B'resheet 22:18). In other words, all peoples would eventually come to know God and recognize His authority through the progeny of Avraham. This may be the covenant which God promises that He will establish with us in v. 9 - that we will be enabled to realize our goal and role as "Light unto the nations". The question is then raised: If we are indeed all together in our Land, living a blessed and righteous national life, how will the nations of the world "take notice" of us?

V

MAKING ROOM FOR THE GRAIN

The answer, counterintuitively, is to be found in the realm of commerce. Let's take a fresh look at v. 10: You shall eat old grain long stored and you shall have to Totzi'u the old to make room for the new. The phrase Totzi'u can alternatively translated as "clear out", as above; or as "export", as S'forno renders it. As he explains, we will have so much grain that we will be able to safely export to other nations. By engaging in commerce with other nations them, two things will become readily apparent:

- 1) We have been generously blessed by our Creator - indicating Divine favor; and
- 2) Our behavior, specifically in the realm of interpersonal relations and business ethics, is of the highest standard.

Remember, this entire blessing is contingent on our integrating serious Torah study into our behavior. Certainly someone who studies Hoshen Mishpat (the section of Halakhah dealing with civil and criminal law) before getting involved in the world of commerce (Rashi) and who endeavors to internalize the sensitivities of that law into his business dealings (S'forno) will serve as an ethical beacon for others. Imagine an entire nation behaving like that!

We can now understand the continuum of the blessing. Subsequent to our own development as a strong and secure nation (see below), the Torah promises us that the covenant - of our being a blessing to the nations of the world - will be fulfilled WITH US. In other words, instead of this covenant being a B'rit Avot, which is operative even if we fail in our tasks, the covenant will be directly with us - in our own merit. That blessing will be enabled first by developing an association with other nations - through the commerce of exporting the goods of the Land.

VI

AND ONCE WE HAVE SUCCEEDED...

From this verse on, where we would reasonably have the concern that once we have drawn the nations of the world to us and they have rallied around the cry "Let us go up to the mountain of the House of God, that He will instruct us of His ways..."

Therefore, the next few verses promise us that our special relationship with God will not only be maintained - but that it will be intensified, hinting at a return to the intimate relationship enjoyed by Man and God in the Garden of Eden ("I will walk among you"; compare with B'resheet 3:8.)

This also explains why these "rewards" are necessary. In order for us to make our impression on the nations of the world, giving us the opportunity to teach, we must have our own stable, safe and economically sound nation. It is hard to develop a holy nation when the threat of war or hunger is constantly over our head; God's blessings insure that we can more easily fulfill our task and lead the

world to a full awareness of the Creator and His moral guidance.

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