

UNDENIABLE RULE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The completion of the book of Vayikra, which we mark this week by the reading of the parshiot of B'Har and B'Chukotai, allows me to look in review at this most important book. The book of Vayikra, perhaps more than any other book of the Torah, deals with details and seeming technicalities. The word b'chukotai itself implies that its laws and commandments are not necessarily given to rational human interpretation and understanding. Just as there are laws of nature and medicine that function, exist and can be proven empirically to be true, and yet are completely baffling and inexplicable to us on a rational basis, so too, in the parallel spiritual world, there are immutable laws and technicalities in the Torah that defy our logic but are nevertheless the basis for the existence and functioning of that holy world. And the book of Vayikra allows us to glimpse that world and its operational laws and commandments.

The importance of the Temple worship service and its attendant requirements of animal sacrifices, the special role and duties of the priests - kohanim - and of the kohain gadol - the High Priest - are major occupants of the book of Vayikra. Included are also the laws regarding the diseases of tzaraat - plagues that affect humans and their clothing and houses. The parsha of Kdoshim contains the most commandments of any given parsha in the Torah. And this week's Torah reading teaches us regarding the sabbatical years and the control of real estate transactions in the Land of Israel by Torah law. Most of the book of Vayikra is details and technicalities and is difficult to comprehend and explain.

Yet, we all know that in life as in agreements, the devil is in the details. Great and noble ideas, lofty hopes and ambitions, all run afoul of the details of implementation. The Oral Law, given to Israel simultaneously with the written Torah, contains all of the necessary details to translate the great ideas and morality of the Torah into the everyday life of Jews. The book of Vayikra purposely concludes with B'Chukotai for it is the chukim - the parts of the Torah that are most difficult for us to understand and explain - that contain the details that allow the great spiritual world of the Torah to operate. It is no wonder therefore that the Torah warns us in this week's parsha that ignoring or violating the chukim will inevitably bring disaster and sadness in its wake.

All of Jewish history testifies to this undeniable rule of Jewish life, mysterious as it may seem to some Jews. This therefore is what makes Vayikra such an important book to study and comprehend. For it is only through the details, in the mysteries and rituals that are detailed in this book, that the great picture of Torah and its goals and values can emerge. In the natural and everyday world we

are accustomed to accept laws and practices that are not completely understandable to us since they obviously work. In the spiritual world of Judaism, we are also bidden to behave in a like manner for these laws and details that we are unable to fully understand are nevertheless the basis for Jewish survival and accomplishment.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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