

The Terrifying Third Aliyah of Behukkotai

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I have always found the third aliyah (Torah-reading section) of Parashat Behukkotai, read in the synagogue this Shabbat, to be terrifying. Leviticus 26:10–46 begins with a series of Divine blessings, such as:

. . . I will establish My abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you. I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people. (Lev. 26: 11–12)

We receive Divine assurance of a close and loving relationship with God, one that has important implications for material wealth and success: if the Israelites follow the Torah, they will be blessed with the warm and affectionate presence of the God of Israel. But the tone shifts ominously almost immediately:

But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments, if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant, I in turn will do this to you . . . (14–16)

If the Israelites do not keep the mitzvot, there will be devastating consequences: misery and pain, consumption and fever, failed crops and stolen harvests, humiliating defeats and brutal beasts, plague and famine. Scholars have long noted that this section (14–39) of curses (*kelalot*) and rebuke (*tokhaḥah*) is nearly *three times as long* as the section of blessings (3–13) that proceeds it. The consolation at the end is also short: The survivors of this catastrophe, now in exile in the land of their foes, will experience a change of heart, and laying aside their old habit of transgression, will honestly confess their sin and find favor with God. The

Torah promises them: “Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or spurn them, or destroy them, or annul My covenant with them.” For the sake of the “covenant with the first-ones” (the earliest Fathers and Mothers of the people) the Israelites will find themselves back in their Creator’s powerful loving embrace.

Why do we continue to read such horrible curses, and another passage much like it in Parashat Ki Tavo (Deut. 28:1–68), each year? The simplest answer is that we read the entirety of the Torah each year, omitting nothing. However, the Mishnah (Megillah 3:6) already notes something special about the curses of the Leviticus passage: “The section of curses must not be broken up but must all be read by one person.”

One of the comments we find in the Talmud explaining this practice tries to balance this need for completeness with the need for some relief:

“Rabbi Shimon son of Lakish said: [We read it in a single go] so that the blessing [typically recited at the beginning of the reading] isn’t said over punishment.” What should a person do? It was taught: “One should start reading in the passage before the section [of curses] and conclude in the passage after it.” (B. Megillah 31b)

Rabbi Shimon son of Lakish (Resh Lakish) asserts that we should read the curses bracketed by two adjacent sections of blessing in a single reading so that the person who makes the blessing “noten hatorah” can be said to have done so over passages that describe blessings rather than curses.

But this is not the only way that we bracket these two lengthy passages of curses. We may have no choice but to read them, but we *can* control *when* we read them in the course of the year. Later in the same Talmudic passage we read:

It has been taught: “Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazar says: Ezra made a regulation for Israel that they should read the curses in Leviticus before Shavuot and those in Deuteronomy before Rosh Ha-Shanah.” What is the reason? Abaye—or some say it was Resh Lakish—said: “*So that when the year ends, so will its curses.*”

In other words, we read these curses just before the year’s seasonal turn so that—in a sort of merciful act—the curses are only in effect until the conclusion of the ritual resetting of the year. The declaration of curses is an annual warning. Twice a year we are read the “riot act” and cautioned to be on our best behavior. But the punishment could only befall us until the end of the holiday period that concludes that portion of the year. For the fall harvest this would be the day after Shemini Atzeret (the convocation for Sukkot—the day after is the 22nd of Tishrei). And the Talmud continues: Shavuot is also a New Year, as we have learnt in a Mishnah (Rosh Ha-Shanah 1:2): “Shavuot is the new year for fruit from trees.”

Thus, for the summer the period would end the week after Shavuot (a *week*, not a *day*, since we count seven weeks leading up to the festival) on the 15th of Sivan (this year, Friday June 21st). The Torah reading is structured in such a way that each period of danger lasts about a month. As Maimonides writes in the Mishneh Torah (Tefillah 13:2):

Ezra instituted the practice of having the Jews read the curses found in the book of Leviticus before Shavuot, and those found in the book of Deuteronomy before Rosh Hashanah. It is a common custom to read Bemidbar before Shavuot [and] . . . Nitzavim before Rosh Hashanah . . .

In other words, there is one parashah each that separates the curses in Behukkotai and Ki Tavo by one week from Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah respectively: Bemidbar, the parashah after Behukkotai, is always read before Shavuot. Nitzavim, the parashah after Ki Tavo, is always read before Rosh Hashanah. Why do we extend the period by a week each year? According to Mordecai ben Avraham Yoffe (c. 1530–1612) in his halakhic work *Levush Malkhut*, this limits the time (or perhaps the immediacy of the claim) that the demonic prosecutor has to bring Israel’s sins to God’s attention:

. . . and we also pause a week, so that the curses are not read immediately before Shavuot, since this [festival] is the day of judgment for the trees. And we do not want to give a claim to the Satan that he could use for [their] prosecution, heaven forbid!

It is important to note that Yoffe sees two different types of danger here: in the fall the danger is from enemies, disease, or violent calamity; in the summer the danger is to agriculture, the environment, and economic conditions. In other words, there are two kinds of threats. One sort of threat is to our person, our bodies, and our physical well-being. The other is to our world, our livelihood, and the well-being of our property. Which is the greater threat? The more immediate threat to our lives is violence and calamity. But ultimately, the greater threat is the environmental one. We will all die, eventually, but we hope the world will be a place that our descendants can live on in abundance after us. If we cannot give them a safe place to live, how is any sort of future possible?

May the *Ribono shel olam* grant us the strength to face both sorts of challenges and may we and those we love pass through all periods of danger well, unharmed, and full of blessings and abundance!