

PARSHAS BEHAR-BECHUKOSAI

תש"פ

The halacha is that we need to read Parshas Bechukosai every year before Shavuos. Our minhag is to also read Parshas Bamidbor before Shavuos as well. This is true even for places where the minhag was to read the entire Torah over three years. They deviated from the regular kriyas haTorah cycle to read the brochos and kolos of this parsha before Kabbolas HaTorah. What do they have to do with each other?

In yeshiva, we have been learning the sugya in Brochos about kabbolas ol malchus shomayim. The gemara in Rosh Hashono says that mitzvos are not for the sake of our personal enjoyment or edification. Mitzvos certainly do grant us these things. But, they are an 'ol—burden—on our necks. They make an absolute demand on us no matter what we feel and what the consequences and price may be. While it is true that learning Torah and doing mitzvos are wonderful and enjoyable and fulfilling, this is not our purpose for doing them. Hashem made a bris with us. We are committed to being Hashem's Am Seguloh—His treasured nation—and in return, Hashem committed to take care of us and see that we survive and thrive. We committed to elevate ourselves by performing Torah and mitzvos, and become Hashem's representatives in this world. This is both a privilege and a responsibility. But more than that—we have obligated ourselves to live a superior life through our keeping of Torah and mitzvos.

We mentioned last week, one part of the mitzvoh of Kiddush Hashem is showing people that leading a Torah life uplifts one and enables one to live on a superior level. People will be impressed by this and they will have greater respect for the Torah as a result. It says in Pirkei Ovos, the learning of Torah lishmoh uplifts and elevates people. It gives a step by step method that in the end turns someone who follows it into the most exalted part of Hashem's creation. Chillul Hashem is when people who represent the Torah fail to live up to that higher standard and cause people to think less of the Torah's ability to elevate and refine the human being.

If we break the bris and break the contract, there are serious consequences. If we keep the contract, we are protected and cared for. This is the tochocho. Before we reaccept the Torah, we have to clearly understand what the consequences are—even in this world.

But there is an interesting prelude to this in Parshas Behar. It begins with the mitzvah of Shemittah. Some people want to explain that the purpose of keeping shemittah is to keep the land fertile and regenerate its productive power. To counteract this idea, the posuk says shemittah is a Shabbos for Hashem. It establishes the nature of our relationship with Hashem. The Seforno says shemittah is designed to allow farmers to take an entire year off of work and learn Torah.

There is a separate obligation to leave one's beautifully cultivated orchards and vineyards completely open to nature. My land becomes hefker. I cannot assert my ownership on it. People and animals can come at will and take the fruit—you can exert no private ownership over it. The purpose of all this is to emphasize that the land doesn't belong to us but to Hashem. The posuk says we need to remember we are temporary settlers in Hashem's world. It does not belong to us. To put it into more contemporary terms, imagine an owner of a large amount of rental property whose is told that he cannot collect rent for an entire year. The buildings don't belong to him then.

But this lesson extends to all of life. The world does not belong to us. It belongs to Hashem. Why does one make a bracha before he puts anything in his mouth? The gemara in Brochos poses a contradiction.

One posuk says the world belongs to Hashem, and another posuk says the world was given to human beings. The answer is that before we make a bracha, the world belongs to Hashem. To eat without making a bracha is stealing from Hashem. Once we make a bracha and recognize that it really doesn't belong to us and Hashem gives it to us out of His kindness, then we have a right to enjoy it. We are living on Earth because Hashem allows us to. It is not an inherent right we have.

It is then that we have the brochos and kolos of Bechukosai. It starts with a description of a wonderful, idyllic world of harmony. Peace, security, and tranquility. Prosperity, and an abundance of goodness—even the Beis Hamikdash—everything will be built up to the highest level in ruchniyus and gashmiyus. But it is all on condition that we fulfill bechukosai tei'leichu.

This parsha teaches us a deep lesson: don't think the relationship between humans and nature follows rigid rules. Hashem runs nature within natural law but Hashem created the natural world to respond to our level of ruchniyus. The Ramban points out an amazing theme in Bereishis. In its original ideal state, the natural world existed in pure harmony with human beings. With each aveiroh of Odom Horishon and his descendants, more and more koloh and disharmony was introduced into the physical world and the land became cursed—it stopped giving its productivity to human beings. There is competition and struggle in the human and animal world because of the negative impact of human aveiros. This is a result of the disharmony that we produce. But had no-one sinned, there would be complete harmony in nature. It is completely up to how our mitzvos and aveiros impact the physical world.

We hear about snow flurries in New York in mid-May—completely unnatural—because Hashem is sending a message that He isn't pleased with what's going on there. There is a coronavirus running rampant all over the world because Hashem is saying He is not happy with how we are acting. There are swarms of locust going from Africa to the Middle-East, Pakistan and Iran. The world is losing balance and there is tremendous disharmony in nature going on. Hashem is sending us message after message that He does not find the old ways of the world acceptable anymore. He is forcing the world to undergo radical change.

International tensions are building up. Disharmony is rampant on every level.

What brings the greatest harmony or disharmony to this world? Rashi says—it isn't kiyum hamitzvos. It is toiling in Torah. But learning Torah is not just an intellectual exercise either. It has to change you and elevate you. Closeness to Hashem through limud haTorah has to transform you fundamentally.

But why is the main result of keeping the bris expressed in terms of rain? The gemara in Taanis says no-one can manipulate or even predict the onset of rain. It is one of three keys to the natural world that Hashem keeps for Himself. This is the most visible way that Hashem directly intervenes in nature—to give us rain as a reward, or to punish us by withholding it. Rain is a sign of Hashem's rachamim. Other times when Hashem works within nature it is more subtle and not always visible.

If you toil in Torah, all good things in this world will come. We will reach the highest level, and eventually we will be worthy of having the Beis Hamikdash in our midst. People think that with enough political and

military force, we can storm Har Habayis and build the Beis Hamikdosh tomorrow. But Chazal tell us this isn't true. The reason why we don't have a Beis Hamikdosh today is because we haven't built our level of kedushoh among Klal Yisroel to a point where an open manifestation of the Shechinoh can be sustained. Chazal tell us that every generation that doesn't have a Beis Hamikdosh is as if it was destroyed in that generation. Why? The reason the Beis Hamikdosh was originally destroyed was because Klal Yisroel's level of kedushoh went below a certain point and the Beis Hamikdosh couldn't exist on that low level. Once we rise to that required level, Hashem will arrange that the Beis Hamikdosh will be built immediately. It doesn't happen automatically. If we don't build ourselves up to that level, the Shechinoh will not dwell among us. According to the Rambam at that point the Beis Hamikdosh will be built through human agency.

What is the flip side of bechukosai teileichu? Im Lo Tishmeu Li. You reject the idea of toiling in Torah then this leads step by step to people rejecting Hashem Himself. After knowing the value of Torah and appreciating the fact that learning Torah creates a close bond with Hashem, you turn away and reject that bond. You don't put this idea of creating a bond with Hashem through limud haTorah into practice. Then you start to resent the people who are toiling in Torah and despise talmidei chachomim.

We have seen in recent weeks and months, there is a deep hatred of frum Jews among the secular Jewish public, and even in the frum world there is a resentment towards those who dedicate their lives to limud haTorah. There is a natural chain of events that starts with toiling in Torah which brings you up and up. But then there is a slippery slope downward when you appreciate what Torah does and how it can transform people and you walk away from it. Your whole level changes. You start to resent those who are learning and start to prevent other people from learning. Klolos start to cause disharmony in the world.

We can imbue the world with ruchniyus and kedushoh, or chas vesholom the opposite.

We live in a difficult period of history. All the yeshivos are closed! All roshei yeshivos were heartbroken when they closed them. The Lakewood rabbonim said selichos when they closed BMG. Hashem is putting us through a terrible nisayon—after after all our talking about how important Torah is, He is testing us to see how much we cherish limud haTorah. He stripped away the external structure of limud haTorah to see how much it really means to us. We have to work our head off to figure out a difficult rishon and show how valuable it is to us. It has to keep us up at night. By Klal Yisroel working on understanding Torah and building up the ruchniyus of the world, nature will respond with incredible brocho and prosperity.

But if we recognize the great gift of limud haTorah and then walk away from it, it brings tremendous spiritual destruction to ourselves and the world. The Rambam says it is a violation of the posuk "ki devar Hashem bozoh."

We are standing a few weeks before kabbolas haTorah. The parshiyos that we read start with an important truth about the world: shemittah—recognizing that the world belongs to Hashem alone. We are not in control. No-one has it all figured out. Who saw this virus coming? Not Trump who thought he was sailing to re-election before the economy tanked, and not Biden. No-one was prepared for it. No-one anticipated it. We are temporary residents in Hashem's world. We live here by Hashem's graciousness and He demands we recognize it. Hashem gave us tremendous power through limud haTorah to transform the human being and bring harmony and brocho to the natural world. If we understand this but don't bring ruchniyus into the world, we destroy the world. Brochos and klolos are part of kabbolas haTorah.

Another aspect of kabbolas haTorah is when Klal Yisroel said "naaseh venishmah". Naaseh means we will perform the mitzvos. But we can't perform mitzvos properly without learning the halachos. So naaseh includes knowing all halacha. What is nishmah? The Bais Halevi wrote that it is the commitment to the deep understanding of Torah. When the Jewish People said naaseh venishmah, the malochim asked, "who taught them this secret?" Why is it a tremendous secret that the malochim were impressed when we said it at Har Sinai? Klal Yisroel realized that the ultimate service of Hashem is to join our minds to His Wisdom that is in the Torah. It is to get understanding of what all the halachos are all about—all the complexity of the sugya. It is not enough to open Mishnah Beruroh. The greatness of Klal Yisroel was in accepting the deep understanding of the Torah on themselves. The bris with Hashem revolves around ameilus baTorah. We take seriously what it means to be an Am Seguloh, and we elevate the level of kedushoh and ruchniyus of the world. We bring harmony to the natural world and Hashem has no choice but to build the Beis Hamikdosh in response.

We are heading toward the strangest kabbolas haTorah in history—without shuls, without yeshivos and botei midrash. Each of us are in our own little teivas Noach, and we have no social structure for learning and davening. Hashem is putting us to the test to see how much we appreciate the Torah and appreciate ameilus baTorah. This is the best way of living an elevated superior life. When we act this way and make a Kiddush Hashem, we project Hashem's presence to the world through being that special nation. The way we do it is through ameilus baTorah—no other way shows how we reflect Hashem's presence in this world. When we are in our rooms by ourselves and we can sit in front of a screen to see whatever we want to see, and we choose to learn Torah—that is a Kiddush Hashem. That is limud Torah lishmoh, and it makes us the most important and superior among all Hashem's creations.

At Har Sinai, we accepted the Torah on Shavuos and committed ourselves to individually become that superior human being and thereby that superior nation. It doesn't come automatically. We need to prepare for it this year with non-stop limud haTorah and keeping up our davening and our middos despite all the distractions. Im yirtzeh Hashem, Hashem will allow us to reopen our shuls and yeshivos and accept the Torah as a tzibbur the way we always do.