

TEMPLE BETH-EL SHABBAT AM TORAH STUDY 5782

B'CHUKOTAI...Leviticus 26:3-17

KOSHI: RABBI BARUCH LEVINE... Two major principles of biblical religion find expression here: the concept of free will and the doctrine of reward and punishment. Obedience to God's will brings reward; disobedience brings due punishment. The choice rests with the people of Israel and its leaders.

Verse	JPS	HEBREW
3	If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments,	אִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּלְכוּ וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם:
4	I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit.	וְנָתַתִּי גֶשְׁמִיכֶם בְּעִתָּם וְנָתְנָה הָאָרֶץ יְבוּלָהּ וְעֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרִיֹו:
5	Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.	וְהַשִּׁיג לְכֶם דִּישׁ אֶת־בְּצִיר וּבְצִיר יִשָּׁיג אֶת־ זֶרַע וְאָכַלְתֶּם לַחֲמֻכָּם לְשִׁבְעַת יָשְׁבַתְּתֶם לְבֶטַח בְּאַרְצְכֶם:
6	I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land.	וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ וּשְׁכַבְתֶּם וְאִין מַחֲרִיד וְהַשְׁבַּתִּי חַיָּה רָעָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְחָרֵב לֹא־ תַעֲבֹר בְּאַרְצְכֶם:
7	[Your army] shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.	וְיִרְדְּפוּ אֶת־אֹיְבֵיכֶם וְנָפְלוּ לְפָנֵיכֶם לַחֲרֹב:
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.	וְיִרְדְּפוּ מֵמֵם חֲמִשָּׁה מֵאָה וּמֵאָה מֵמֵם רִבְּבָה וְיִרְדְּפוּ וְנָפְלוּ אֹיְבֵיכֶם לְפָנֵיכֶם לַחֲרֹב:
9	I will look with favor upon you and make you fertile and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you.	וּפָנִיתִי אֵלֵיכֶם וְהִפְרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶתְכֶם וְהִקִּמְתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם:
10	You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new.	וְאָכַלְתֶּם יֶשֶׁן נוֹשֵׁן וְיִשָּׁן מִפְּנֵי חֲדָשׁ תּוֹצִיאוּ:
11	I will establish My abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you.	וְנָתַתִּי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא־תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם:
12	I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people.	וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְהִיִּיתִי לְכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי לְעָם:
13	I am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.	אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִהָיִית לָהֶם עֲבָדִים וְאֲשַׁבֵּר {פ}מִטַּת עַלְכֶם וְאוֹלַךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמְמִיֹוֹת:
14	But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments,	וְאִם־לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת־כָּל־ הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה:
15	if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant,	וְאִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּמְאָסוּ וְאַם אֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי:

16	I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you—consumption and fever which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish; you shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your enemies shall eat it.	אֶף־אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה־זֹאת לָכֶם וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם בְּהִלָּה אֶת־הַשְּׁחִיפֹת וְאֶת־הַקְּדָחַת מִכְּלוֹת עֵינַיִם וּמַדִּיבֹת נַפְשׁ וְזָרַעְתֶּם לָרִיק זָרַעְכֶם וְאָכְלוּהוּ אֹיְבֵיכֶם:
17	I will set My face against you: you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you. You shall flee though none pursues.	וְנִתַּתִּי פָנַי בְּכֶם וְנִגְפַתֶּם לִפְנֵי אֹיְבֵיכֶם וְרָדוּ בְכֶם שְׂנְאֵיכֶם וְנִסְתַּם וְאִין־רָדָךְ אֶתְכֶם:

REMEZ...The Hint

Searching for clues that give us greater insight into the world of our ancestors

V. 3-4 *If you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments, and do them, then I will grant your rains in their season. . .*

RASHI... Literally, *“If you go through my statutes...”* One could say this refers to fulfilling the commandments, but the very next phrase says this. This must mean something else entirely. What then? *“Tey’leychu”* that you should “go through—studying my statutes.” That is, labor in Torah.

TORAT KOHANIM... *‘go through my statutes. . .’* implies movement, unfolding awareness, the process of Torah study in which one progresses increasingly to more sophisticated levels of understanding, so we will *“do them.”*

TALMUD...The rabbis taught: *“If you will walk in my statutes...”* If—IM is a term of imploring, implying *“would that you. . .”* So, in the Psalms, *“Would that my people would hearken to Me.”* (81:14) [Avodah Zarah 5a]

RABBI YITSCHAK of VORKI. . . The Hebrew word IM can be rendered as “If” or “whether.” This implies that in approaching a mitzvah to perform, one should ask “IM”—whether it is fitting to be done at that time and place. *“Va-asitem otam”*—In doing them, one must ask how they are to be fulfilled.

RABBI PINCHAS PELI...There is a single word in Torah that caused a whole new world of moral and religious thought, a short word, just two letters. “IF” introduces the covenantal imperative, establishing an inevitable interdependence between Israel’s destiny and its moral conduct. . .The blessings Israel is to receive are conditional.

TALMUD. . .*It was taught. . .*Rabbi Meir said: Any condition which is a double condition, stating both the terms of the condition and its direct opposite, is not a conditional at all. As it is written, *“If you walk in My statutes. . .”* [26:3] And then *“If you despite My statutes. . .”* [26:15]

RAMBAN . . .Three levels of keeping the covenant are implied. There are those who *“walk in His statutes,”* performing the Law in obedience, for immediate material reward. . .There are those who *“observe the mitzvot,”* out of fear for their place in the World to come. Finally, there are some who simply *“do them”* out of loving devotion. They shall merit blessings in this

world and, “*doing them,*” so, too, in the world to come.

ZOHAR. . .The word “*OTAM*” is written in incomplete form. Thus, it can likewise be read as “*ATEM,*” meaning, “*And you will make them.*” This teaches us that when we uphold God’s commandments, it is as though we have created them ourselves...

V.5 *Then...you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land....*

RASHI... “*you will eat your bread “I’sovah...”* One will need eat only a little and will feel blessed inside. The eating itself will bring satisfaction, no matter the quantity.

ALSHECH... Although it is true that reward for performing Torah precepts is reserved for the world to come, there are ‘free gifts’ God can give us over and above them in this world....So, ‘If you walk in My statutes,” that is—even those of my mitzvot you don’t understand, and you do not suspect Me of caprice in so doing; “*If you will uphold my commandment,*” those you can understand, but perform them not simply because you agree with them but because they are mine; “*if you do them*” without expectation of reward, then you will receive free gifts. . .the feeling of ‘*sovah—being satiated*” will be yours. . .

V. 12 *I will walk among you. I will be your God and you shall be My people*

RASHI... I will stroll with you in the Garden of Eden, like one of you—yet you will not tremble before Me.

V. 14 / 15 *But if you do not heed Me, and do not observe all these mitzvot; if you reject my statutes and spurn My laws...*

RAMBAM...All the blessings and the curses enumerated in Torah may be understood in this way. If you have served the Lord in joyfulness, God will send you blessing and withhold the curse--giving you opportunity to become versed in Torah and merit the World to come. So, two worlds will you gain.... But, if you forsake the Lord, indulging in immorality and the like, God will bring the curse, and remove blessing. Your mind will not rest in Torah, neither will your body be fit enough to perform God’s mitzvot. So will you lose your hold on two worlds: this one and the World to Come.

DRASH...The Interpretation

How do Ancient Truths Impact our Modern Reality?

RABBI HAROLD KUSHNER....God does not punish and God does not reward. God does not intervene in this world to pin medals on people, or to change the consequences of their deeds to fit their moral desserts. However, God has given us a world in which certain things can lead to good consequences While others lead to bad ones. . .Why does God then let injustice persist? ...In truth, God is not in the business of letting them happen nor of preventing them. Some things happen because people are less just and kind than they might be; others happen for reasons we cannot comprehend. . .Yet, there are other currencies in which people may be rewarded or punished: growth of character, clearing of conscience, the esteem and respect of friends, a good name to bequeath to our children, a sense of having realized our human potential as that rarest of creatures—an authentic and humane human being. . .What can God

do for us with these limitations?. . .God cannot change the ground rules, but God can help us to know what the ground rules are and thus discover satisfaction through our actions. God can help us find the strength and the faith to go on living in this world, no matter how unfairly it may treat us, because it is the only world, the only life we've got...

RABBI EUGENE BOROWITZ...Though I cannot affirm direct and immediate Divine retribution, that need not require me to deny any system of Divine justice. God should not be bound by the limits that allow us to accept the imperfections of human justice. . .I do not deny that, as best as I can understand, God does excruciatingly less than my life experience leads me to believe God should do—but my anguish does not become so determinative that I can say—God does nothing to check human iniquity and foster human goodness. Rather, I often dimly discern God's shaping power making itself felt in the ordinary flow of reality.... Love engenders love and violence arouses hate; wisdom enriches life and ignorance diminishes it. Even amid the brutal power realities we call history, the trampled human spirit has triumphed. . .Having forced myself to break the silence with these words, I find my mind inadequate to say the more that my heart tells me is true...

PROF ARTHUR KURZWEIL.... A quick read of today's portion gives me the impression that my relationship with the Creator is one of cause and effect: if I do what God wants, good things will happen; if I do things contrary to what God wants, bad things will happen. Sounds like karma. If I am in sync with the world, things will be pleasant; if I am out of sync, the results will be otherwise. Of course, life is not so simple. In other words: if I am experiencing something unpleasant, am I to assume it's the hand of God punishing me? If things go well, can I assume that this is God's intent, to reward Kurzweil for the good he has done?. . .In tractate Ta-anit, we learn about a Talmudic personality who has, since I met him, been my favorite: Nachum of Gamzu. It's strange, though he was the teacher of Rabbi Akiva for over twenty years, he only appears a handful of times.... The Talmud tells us that there were two major lessons Akiva learned from his teacher. The first notion is that every letter of the Torah has meaning. ...The second is actually reflected in Nachum's very name. For Gam—zu has a double meaning: Nachum came from Gimzu, and Nachum's favorite saying was "*Gam Zu l'Tovah—This, too, is for the best.*" Perhaps the most well-known story in this vein is about Akiva himself, who looks for a place to spend the night, but nobody in town gives him lodging. He says, "*Gam Zu l'Tovah.*" So he camps on the outskirts of town. His candle is blown out by the wind and he responds, "*Gam Zu l'Tovah.*" An animal kills his rooster, and he says, "*Gam Zu l'Tovah.*" Another wild beast kills his donkey and he thinks, "*Gam Zu l'Tovah.*" Next morning, Rabbi Akiva learns the entire town was attacked. Had Akiva been given lodging, had the candle not gone out, had the noise of the animals not been hushed, he may have suffered attack too. ...I do not want to be glib about human suffering, not mine and not anyone else's. In fact, I was once taught an important ground rule for using "*Gam Zu l'Tovah.*" You can only say it about your own suffering, never someone else's. When I see you fall and hurt your knee, I don't reply, "Karma.;" Instead, I try and help relieve your pain. When I fall and hurt my knee, I don't say, "Poor me." Instead, I reply, "*Gam Zu l'Tovah*" ...How can I somehow, in my spiritual work on myself, use this hardship to work on my soul?" ...In the Steinsaltz Talmud, in this same Tractate Taanit, [20a] right in the midst of all the discussion of fasts and human suffering, we find a most remarkable note, as Rabbi Steinsaltz explains, "Having cited Rabbi Judah's interpretation of what appears to be a blessing as in fact being a curse, the Gemara continues with four cases in which Rabbi Judah interprets Torah verses in the opposite direction-taking a seeming curse and explaining it as a blessing."

How do we know what is a curse and what is a blessing? How can we be sure that the trial of today is not really the reward of tomorrow? Clearly, we cannot. The best we can do is to understand the paradox; to work to repair the world, and to deepen our faith that in some enigmatic way, all of our trials, all of our joys, all of our failures and all of our successes are steps toward the Infinite One...

SOD...The Secret

What deeper knowing do we take away from spending time with the Torah text?

RABBI BILLY DRESKIN...Life, as incredible and magnificent as it can be, can also hurt terribly. Dreams shatter. Hope sinks. Loved ones die. Sometimes, the pieces can be put back together; sometimes, they can't. We know so little about why life progresses the way it does. But what our faiths have taught us is that, whether we frolic light-heartedly through gleaming alabaster cities, or we stumble despondently through the valley of the shadow of death, it is by holding onto one another that we make our journeys complete, and we make our journey holy- a journey made triumphant by individuals coming together—by two's and by three's, by ten's and by ten's of ten' s, and walking hand in-hand-in-God's hand, to bring light and warmth and wisdom—to bring love to one another during the very best of times and during the very worst, as well.