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said of our religious and spiritual life. As the masters of Musar have claimed throughout the ages: repeated virtuous action leads to virtuous habits and, eventually, to a virtuous life.

This revised vision of the meaning of *chukim* might be more palatable, but still not fully harmonious with modern sensitivities. We are suspicious of rote and repetition in the areas of the mind and of the spirit. Spontaneity and authenticity are the watchwords of the age. And yet, the same people who refuse rote in their *religious* lives will gladly work out for hours on an exercise machine or mindlessly repeat functions on a computer to succeed at work. The difference is that the fitness and professional worlds have succeeded in creating a more vivid picture of the end goal of these repetitive actions. We are surrounded by posters and stories of how you will look at the end; how these concrete and even uncomfortable actions play a role in getting that ripped body, that degree, or that corner office.

Parashat Bechukotai offers a vivid description of such an endgame for Biblical Israel: bountiful harvests, rain in its due season, and uncontested military dominion over our land. The Talmudic rabbis, living in an age of vulnerability and precariousness, shifted the endgame metaphysically to the world to come. In later centuries, Jewish sages continued trying to find compelling frameworks for halacha that transcend it but do not do without it. The philosophers set the goal of intellectual enlightenment. The Kabbalists strove for the mystical reconnection of the world to the Godhead. The masters of Musar aimed for a life of ethical perfection. The Hasidim sought to frame Jewish Law in simple devotion and joy. In our days of sovereign selves, what would the final product look like? In what specific ways is Torah supposed to make us flourish? This urgent agenda must be addressed, individually and collectively, so that the forest is not lost among the trees.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Behukotai

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

June 1, 2019 | 27 Iyyar 5779

Annual (Leviticus 26:3-27:34): Etz Hayim p. 747; Hertz p. 542

Triennial (Leviticus 27:1-27:34): Etz Hayim p. 753; Hertz p. 547

Haftarah (Jeremiah 16:19-17:14): Etz Hayim p. 763; Hertz p. 551

D'var Torah: What is Our Path

Rabbi Juan Mejia, Conservative Yeshiva Alumni ('02-'04)

The word **chok** ("law") with which our parashah (*Bechukotai*) begins has a complicated nuance for modern Jews. Since Saadya Gaon (Babylonia, 9th C.), **chukim** have been identified with the commandments of the Torah which we follow even if we are unable to understand the rationale behind them. This is an idea that runs against the grain of the modern democratic ethos, in which individuals consent to laws and ideas precisely because they understand them. In a brilliant tour de force, Rabbi Ephraim of Luntschitz (Poland, 16th C.), in his commentary *Keli Yakar*, uproots this traditional meaning and connects it to the word that follows "*im bechukotai telekhu*" "if you are to **walk** (literally) in my laws." For the *Keli Yakar* the first step in the ladder to perfection is to train (and in the beginning maybe even *force*) our legs, literally, to take us to the house of study and to the performance of *mitzvot*. The repetition of good habits, proper routines and correct actions will develop a "second nature" in which *mitzvot* will become part of our regular behavior. This is something that we know to be true both in our physical development (muscle memory is a key to any successful physical training) and in our intellectual

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growth (neural pathways that are repeated grow stronger with time). The same can be

D'var Haftarah: The Real Miracle

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Yirmiyahu anticipates a future when the nations of the world will come to recognize and acknowledge God: “The Lord is my strength and my stronghold and my refuge on a day of distress. To you, the nations will come.” The nations will reject the folly of their idolatry and understand its untruth: “But to lies, our fathers were heir, mere breath that cannot avail.” (verse 19) God will facilitate this recognition: “Therefore, I am about to show them, this time I will show them My hand and My power, and they shall know that My name is the Lord.” (verse 21)

The following midrash tries to outline the evolution of this recognition. God, through His redemptive acts and through the revelation of the Torah to His people inspires awareness of His reality in the world: “The Lord is my strength and my stronghold and my refuge on a day of distress. To you, the nations will come. – Israel said to the Holy One blessed be He: When you performed miracles at the sea, they said to you: ‘God is my strength and my song’ (Exodus 15:2) Didn’t Rahab (in the story of the conquest of Yericho) hear and come and cling to You, as it says: ‘And she said to the men, I know that God gave to you the land’ ‘For we heard that God dried up the water of the Reed Sea’ (Joshua 2:9-10) That is to say: The Lord is my strength and my stronghold and my refuge on a day of distress. When you performed miracles in the days of Solomon, as it says: And he gave strength to His king’ (1 Samuel 2:10) Didn’t the Queen of Sheba come and praise You? As it says: ‘And the Queen of Sheba heard the rumor of Solomon.’ (1 Kings 10:1) And what did she say? ‘May the Lord your God be blessed who has desired you.’ (10:9) When you took us out of Egypt and gave us the Torah, that is called ‘oz – strength’, as it says: ‘And the Lord gave strength to His people’ (Psalms 29:11) And didn’t Yitro come and cling to you? That is why it says: ‘To you, the nations will come.’” (Shemot Rabbah 27:4)

What inspires people to recognize God? According to this midrash, cognizance of some miraculous act will inspire people. Most moderns, however, are immune to this sort of awareness. What else inspires? This question is addressed directly by this midrash. People are drawn to God-given wisdom and inspiration. If Yitro and the Queen of Sheba are any indications, the answer is simple. People who lead exemplary lives, according to God’s precepts, and live lives where they treat others with love and kindness are probably the greatest and most “miraculous” source of divine inspiration.

Parashat Behukkotai Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this last parashah of Vayikra we find the rewards we receive for observing the Mitzvot (commandments) and the penalties we might get for transgressing them. If you listen to the reading in the synagogue, you will notice that the penalties are usually read without a break and in a low voice.

- 1) One of the rewards that we will be awarded is eating our food to satisfaction (26:6). How is that different from having plenty of food (which is suggested by the plentiful harvest described.)
- 2) The first punishment for breaking the covenant are illnesses that are described as 'destroying the eyes and depleting the soul (26:16)'. Whose eyes and souls are suffering? (There could be several readings here.)
- 3) While in the 'awards' part absence of war or victory in war is taking up a relatively large part, in the 'punishments' (26:16) there is little description of battle. Rather, there are descriptions of desolation, illness, lack of food and exile. Why?
- 4) A Leitwort (a guiding root in the Hebrew that repeats often, carrying a central message) of rewards and punishments section (26:3-46) is *Eretz*, land. Why?
- 5) The book of Vayikra ends with a statement "these are the Mitzvot that the LORD commanded Moshe to the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai" (27:34). Why do you think that the location is mentioned?

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